


# Early Intervention in Special Education and Rehabilitation



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## IDENTIFICATION OF CHILDREN WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DELAYS / DISABILITIES IN PRESCHOOLS

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### SUMMARY

*Research shows that developmental disabilities and specific developmental problems in children remain undetected by parents, teachers and professional associates. Our goal was to establish the method of identification of children with developmental delays/ disabilities in the existing procedure of a preschool and the system / procedure of ongoing support. In the existing procedure of preschool institutions there is no procedure for dealing with parents' concerns; 77.4 % of the teachers claim that they notice children who are in some way different from typical children. There are significant differences in the responses of the teachers and the expert service as to the beginning of child observation, giving of instructions to a teacher after the child is observed and the approach to the child is adjusted after observation and adjustment of access to the child. Teachers and members of the expert service show a high degree of agreement, statistically significant, about the statements regarding the need for a special educator as a professional associates in the preschools.*

**Key words:** children with developmental delays / disabilities, preschool, identification, support, teachers, expert service

### INTRODUCTION

Identification of children with developmental delays / disabilities in preschools as a form of early detection and intervention is threatened by the lack of validated procedures, protocols and adequate instruments. Research shows that developmental disabilities and specific developmental problems in children remain undetected by parents, teachers, professional associates. Children with developmental delays / disabilities are identified only when they join the school system, as a result of significant development of complications that are not recognized on time. It is a nursery, i. e. preschool period that offers an opportunity to recognize such children by means of reliable instruments and techniques, and to provide them with adequate support. Adequate support includes adjustments in the environment of the child, in all developmental domains, according to the current level and the development abilities of the child, where through quality interaction in an educational group such a child has the possibility to develop all their abilities (Ilić, 2015).

In recent years in our country, as in most other countries, the inclusion of children with disabilities is required by law. The existence of a large number of children with disabilities and specific developmental problems in preschools, with a tendency to increase, without adequate process of problem identification, and consequently without adequate support in the preschool age, justifies the need for research in this field. In the

process of detection / identification and support to children in preschools we anticipate active participation of teachers, parents and special educators.

Disability and specific development problems require parallel intervention in at least two different areas. The first area includes all forms of treatment which aims to improve the effectiveness of the child's behavior in those domains in which weaknesses are manifested. The second area, equally important as the first one, includes intervention within the environment of the child. Parents and preschool staff must be aware of the nature of certain problems, real restrictions imposed by them, and a number of external influences, which can reduce its consequences in everyday behavior and communication.

In this way, through such intervention settings, the environment is in a position to offer better support to the development of the child, taking over part of the corrective influence and form a positive atmosphere, in which the interaction between the child and significant persons in their world is relieved of further misunderstanding. This emphasizes that the holders of support for the child should be the ones who surround the child directly: parents and professionals working in a preschool (it is necessary that the different profiles of experts work closely together, preschool and health care team, diagnostician and therapist). A good example of this approach is a paradigm offered by Teeter and Semrud-Klikeman (1997), which requires four specific levels at which, ideally, the identification and intervention for children with specific developmental disorders would be performed:

- problem identification (based on a child's achievements or from an interview with parents);
- formulation of special strategies related to learning, outside behavior control (including parent counseling);
- part of specific treatment that can be provided by the institution;
- regular monitoring of realization and effects of these interventions, which enables the modification and amendment of planned strategies.

The basic principle of intervention as regards developmental disabilities and specific development problems is timeliness: the earlier a problem is detected and treatment is initiated, the greater are the chances of achieving the desired effects (Webb et al., 2001). It is particularly important that the treatment is time- aligned, that it even precedes a critical period of maturation, which, depending on which skills are concerned, may involve initiating of treatment procedures ideally in the first years of life.

New perspectives of support, with the historical foundation in the already mentioned theories, are based on the system-ecological approach, i. e. the holistic view of the child's development (all domains of development: cognitive, linguistic, physical, social and emotional, interconnected), dynamic (environment should change to remain supportive and responsive to changing individual needs of the child), transactional (development is encouraged by two-way, reciprocal interactions between the child and their environment, and the outcomes are seen as a result of constant, dynamic interplay of behavior of the child, the parents' response to the child's behavior, and environment –related variables that may affect the child and the parents), knowledge or the development is unique, which means that an individual builds their own, unique perspective (Lewis & Porter, 2004).

## METHODOLOGY AND IMPLEMENTATION OF RESEARCH

On the basis of the difficulty in identifying children with developmental disabilities / delays set out in the introduction, and the current system of support, we started from the assumption that the existing system of identification and support to children with disabilities in preschools is not comprehensive and complete.

According to this hypothesis, we have set the following goal: to establish the method of identification of children with developmental delays/ disabilities in the existing procedure of a preschool and the system / procedure of ongoing support.

Place of research: Preschool Rakovica, kindergartens Dusko Radovic, Orascic and Izvorcic; Preschool Palilula, kindergartens: Poletarac, Mali princ; during the years of 2011/2012.

The research was conducted in several stages. The preparatory phase included the selection of two preschools at the level of the City of Belgrade, obtaining approval and analysis of existing procedures for early detection of children, instruments used, types of monitoring and support to children with disabilities and disorders. At this stage, a dedicated instrument was designed for teachers and expert service that measures the degree of agreement of respondents (teachers, staff, and expert services) with certain statements related to the process of detecting the children, the cooperation of teachers and expert services on the same issue, as well as the cooperation of teachers and expert services with parents.

### Description of the sample of teachers

Table 1 *Distribution of teachers by preschool*

Preschool	number	percentage
Pallilula	24	38.1
Rakovica	39	61.9
In total	63	100

61.9% of the teachers is from Preschool Rakovica, while 38.1% is from Preschool Palilula.

Table 2 *Distribution of teachers by years of working experience*

number	minimum	maximum	mean	standard deviation
63	1,00	33	14.61	10.905

On average, teachers have fourteen years of working experience, the minimum working experience being one year and the maximum working experience being thirty three years.

### Description of the sample of expert service

Table 3 *Distribution of expert service staff by expert profile*

	number	percentage
pedagogue	6	50.0
psychologist	4	33.3
speech therapist	2	16.7
In total	12	100.0

50% of the examined expert services include pedagogues, 33.3% psychologists, 16.7% speech therapists.

Table 4 *Distribution of expert service staff by years of working experience*

	minimum	maximum	mean	standard deviation
12	1	32	8.83	9.944

On average, professional associates have nine years of working experience, the minimum working experience being one year, and the maximum working experience being thirty two years.

### Description of instruments

The QUESTIONNAIRE designed for teachers was formed on the principle of Likert scale, according to which the respondent has the task to express their level of agreement or disagreement with each and every statement on a five-point scale: "I strongly disagree", "I disagree", "I agree and I disagree", "I agree", "I strongly agree". The statements with which teachers indicate their level of agreement/ disagreement are related to the procedure of identification of a child who is not coping with a group of children, communication with the expert service on this and related issues, its inclusion in the process of assessment and support for the child. In the second part we examined the level of agreement with statements of teachers with regard to cooperation with parents as well as the need to involve special education experts in a preschool expert service.

The QUESTIONNAIRE designed for members of the expert service is made on the same principle, and is intended to describe existing procedures for the detection of children, assessment and support in preschools. The statements with which professional associates indicate their level of agreement / disagreement are related to communication with teachers, giving instructions and information related to a specific problem, the inclusion in the process of assessment and support for the child. In the second part we examined the level of agreement of the expert service with regard to cooperation with parents, the burden carried by experts in the expert service, as well as the need to involve special education experts in a preschool expert service.

## PRESENTATION OF RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Current support to children with developmental problems in preschools***Teachers' statements*

Table 5. *Distribution of teachers' answers to the statements regarding the question: After I forward information to the expert service that I have a problem with a child in the group, the expert service initiates the process of observing the child in a short period of time (3 days).*

	number	percentage
I strongly disagree.	5	8.8
I disagree.	16	28.1
I agree and I disagree.	21	36.8
I agree.	8	14.0
I strongly agree.	7	12.3
In total	57	100.0

There has been a very high percentage of indecision regarding these statements, even 36.8 % of teachers both agrees and disagrees (we should seek clarification of this phenomenon in order to set a clearer structure of the duties and responsibilities of all participants in the educational process). 36.9 % of teachers disagrees with this statement in varying degrees, which can indicate the teachers' frustration and the cause of the lack of interest to send the child to the expert service.

Table 6 *Distribution of teachers' answers to the statements regarding the question: After observing the child, the expert service gives me instructions for work with the child.*

	number	percentage
I disagree.	1	1.8
I disagree.	11	19.3
I agree and I disagree.	21	36.8
I agree.	20	35.1
I strongly agree.	4	7.0
In total	57	100.0

Indecision was recorded in 44.3 % of teachers, which leads us to question the cause of it. Do teachers receive feedback, or are not satisfied with it, or with the help of these instructions do not solve the problem that remains in further implementation of activities with this child or do not receive adequate support, or the support is completely absent (13.1 % of teachers claimed that they do not receive instructions)? Setting clear procedures, guidelines, responsibilities and rights of each team member with appropriate instruments would lead to a solution that would bring satisfaction to everyone in their role and competence, and the child would be in the center of adequate support.

32.8% of teachers fully agrees with the statement "Every child for whom I notice any deviation, standing out, different behavior in a group of children, I inform the expert service", 44.8% agrees, 15.5% agrees and disagrees, while 6.9% does not agree. In answers to this statement it is noticed that teachers do not send all the children for whom they



notice any deviation, namely 22.4% of them does not agree with this statement in varying degrees. In the process of early identification and support of children in the preschools there are no clear procedures, division of responsibilities, a description of the scope of work of those involved in the educational process. Following the current results, based on the teachers' statements, we can conclude that 36.8% of teachers does not receive clear instructions, plan and adjustments for working with a particular child. 42.6% of teachers manage on their own according to their knowledge and experience, 75.5% of teachers asks colleagues for advice when there is a problem with a child, while 36% of teachers gave up notifying the expert service about every problem that occurs in the process of working with children. 82.3% of teachers agrees with the statement "It would be of great benefit to get clear instructions on how and what to do with the child", only 17.7% of teachers is undecided, and there are no teachers that oppose this statement.

How teachers see the presence of a special educator as an associate and what their expectations are can be seen through the answers to the following statements "From a special educator I could get clear instructions how to act, how to adapt activities for a child who behaves differently." 77.5 % of teachers agrees and 21 % of teachers agrees and disagrees. None of the teachers expressed disagreement. We conclude that a high percentage of them indicate trust and a positive attitude towards the special educator as a professional associate. 93.5 % of teachers agrees with the statement "The presence of a special educator in the kindergarten would allow me higher quality work and relief in working with children who behave differently and have some difficulties", 4.8 % of them both agrees and disagrees, while only 1.6 % of them expresses disagreement. The statement "Only a pedagogue and a psychologist, as expert service associates, can provide useful information about the child" is confirmed by 32.3 % of teachers, the same percentage of them agrees and disagrees, while most of them, 35.5 % expresses disagreement in this rather balanced distribution.

The teachers' statements as regards relationship with parents. According to the teachers, parents are mostly interested in child activities in the kindergarten (54.3 %), 11.9 % is not interested, while 33.9 % of teachers is undecided regarding this statement. Parents are asking for the child's behavior in the group, according to 71.6 % of the teachers, 25 % of the teachers is undecided, while only 3.3 % of them disagrees. 60 % of teachers agrees with the statement that that they are limited as to what they can say to parents about the child's behavior, 23.3 % agrees and disagrees, while 16.7 % disagrees. Teachers show a high degree of agreement with the statement "When I have a problem with a child I feel free to be able to share it with their parents." 78.4% of teachers agrees with the statement, 18.3% agrees and disagrees, 3.3% disagrees. We see a possibility for a high degree of cooperativeness and moderate openness of teachers to introduce parents to events and possible difficulties of their children in the educational process. However, only 33.4% of the teachers agrees with the statement "I can openly talk to parents about the child, the child's behavior, and my observations," while the greatest percentage indicates indecision (60% agrees and disagrees). From the initial openness shown by the teachers in the first statement regarding cooperation with parents, the detailed analysis shows that they reflect, however, according to further statements, to whom, how and how much they will say. Specifically, 80.3% of the teachers are ready for limited cooperation, which is graded and cautious in terms of the method and quality of

addressing a parent. 11.7 % of teachers have superficial communication with parents in terms that they provide information only when the parents ask for it. According to the teachers' statements, the interest of parents for activities of the child in the kindergarten is present in 44.1 %, 49.2 % of the teachers is undecided as regards this statement, while 6.8 % of them claims that parents are not interested. This distribution of results is the same for the teachers' statements regarding the interest of parents for the child's behavior in the kindergarten.

The reason for the lack of interest of parents due to their work overload and lack of parental time for children is supported by 26.6 % of the teachers, 41.7 % agrees and disagrees, while 31.7 % of the teachers disagrees with that.

#### *Statements of preschool expert service associates*

91.6% of expert service associates agrees with the statement that after observing a child they give instructions to teachers on how to treat the child and which adjustments to make, while 8.3% agrees and disagrees. The statements that they give instructions to teachers on adapting of activities in the educational process for children with disabilities is also confirmed by 91.6% in varying degrees of agreement. On the basis of these statements we come to the conclusion that after observation of the child, the members of the expert service give instructions to the teachers as well as some adjustments for the child.

Based on the conflicting claims of the teachers and members of the expert service we realize that there are different perspectives and expectations. One hypothesis might be that teachers do not deny the presence of the expert service but the way in which the experts provide support, instructions and guidelines are not operational in the work process of the teachers.

50% of the members of the expert service agrees with the statement "After we observe the child we have an interview with their parents", while 50% agrees and disagrees with it. A high percentage of members of the expert service shows indecision about the willingness of parents to accept their instruction (66.7%). According to the experts, 58.3% of parents seek help from the expert service when they are anxious for some reason. Experts agree with the statement that they monitor children with disabilities and their achievements on a monthly, quarterly, semi-annually in 75%, while 25% of the associates shows indecision (agrees and disagrees). With the statement "After I get information from teachers that they have a problem in a group with a certain child, in a short term (3 days) I begin a process of observing the child" 25 % of the members of the expert service fully agrees, 58.3 % agrees, and 16.7 % agrees and disagrees.

We find that the experts are divided as regards their agreement with the following statement: "After observation and interviews with parents, we give teachers a plan they should follow in their work with the child, adjustments regarding inclusion.": 25% of the members of the expert service fully agrees, 33.3% agrees, 33.3% both agrees and disagrees, while 8.3% disagrees. Regarding the statement, "The presence of a special educator, as an associate in teams in the preschools, would facilitate the work with children who exhibit disabilities or problems in their development or behavior", there is a high degree of agreement with 27.3% of the members of the expert service fully

agreeing, 45.5% of them agreeing, and 27.3% both agreeing and disagreeing. There is no disagreement about this statement. In line with this is the degree of agreement with the statement "It is enough that there is a special educator and a psychologist in the expert service as support for children with disabilities and disorders in development and behavior.", with which 8.3 % of the members of the expert service strongly disagrees, 75 % disagrees, and 16.7 % both agrees and disagrees. There is no agreement about this statement.

### **Current support through the analysis of plans and reports of work in preschools Palilula and Rakovica**

In the analyzed reports / plans of the preschools there is no information either about the procedure of identification of children with delays / disabilities, their monitoring or about support systems for them. We noticed only the aspects of support for children with visible disabilities and difficulties.

According to the data on the number of children and the organization of educational personnel, an expert from the expert service Palilula covers five hundred and six children (1:506) and forty-seven teachers (1:47) in their field of work. A speech therapist in their field of work is responsible for one thousand six hundred and eighty-seven children (1:1687). The number of children in the preschool Palilula is 5063, distributed in 242 groups, while the preschool Rakovica is noticed to have one third less, 3660 children distributed in 149 groups. The data provides insight into the degree of workload of members of the educational staff.

Programs of the preschool Palilula that are important for our analysis:

**Program for work with children with developmental disabilities.** In the municipality of Palilula the inclusion of children with disabilities is done at three levels: *in a regular educational group* (individualized mode – removing physical and communication barriers in the institution with respect to certain principles set out in detail in the presented report); *in a regular educational group with additional support and IEP* (additional levels of support in the form of creating individual education plan and provision of support to the teacher in the implementation thereof, as well as the adjustment of the environment); *in a development group based on the IEP*. (It includes children with severe disabilities). The IEP may be made according to an adjusted program (IEP – AP) and a modified program (IEP – MP). To create the IEP according to the modified program, the expert team for inclusive education obtains the opinion of an interdepartmental committee that assesses the need for additional education, health and social support to the child.

**Professional family support programs:** *information* (general parent-teacher meetings and meetings in groups, individual interviews with parents, parents boards, "open door day"); *education* (thematic parents meetings during the year, events, celebrations, exhibitions, a parents corner...); *direct participation* (participation of parents in adaptation, planning and implementation of topics, workshops, playrooms for children and with children, decorating rooms for parents, breeding area, purchasing and making resources, toys, costumes for theater productions, decorating and equipping of the yard with a variety of props and machines, preparation and realization of

celebrations in the kindergarten, visits to workplaces of parents of specific professions, excursions and activities in nature, celebrating Childcare's Week, Christmas and New Year holidays, Easter, sales exhibition for the purchase of certain materials (didactic, audio visual aids, toys), participation in charity events...).

In the preschool Palilula there is the "Team for inclusive education" that appoints the "Team for providing additional support for the child." This team consists of: a teacher, a nurse-teacher, professional associates, associates, parent or guardian, and if necessary, pedagogical assistant and an expert outside the institution. This team makes a pedagogical profile of the child. We have found that the team does not have experts in the field of special education and rehabilitation that has competence (based on theoretical and practical content acquired during their studies) to create the IEP and the adjustments that need to be made for the child. Experts of this profile are able to make a good assessment of the child's abilities and help teachers, pedagogues, and parents in adapting the content, activities for each particular child.

As part of the program presented in the plan / report, there are no exposed indicators, the indicators that would evaluate the implementation of the program, its achievements, progress or possible difficulties encountered in the work.

Preschool institution Rakovica: There are no specific programs, except for children with disabilities in a development group in a kindergarten "Dusko Radovic". The report describes the cooperation of the preschool with the Health Care Center Rakovica (to carry out systematic check ups: dentist, pediatrician, ophthalmologist, etc.), in which there is no description of cooperation to support children with disabilities and cooperation at the level of the educational process. A speech therapist and a psychologist work in the main building of the Health Care Center while one pediatrician from the medical center is involved in the interdepartmental committee on the municipal level. All the areas of the report that talk about connecting with the local community, and with the scope of work of associates, indicate the possibility of developing a network of support for the child with disabilities to be enrolled in this institution.

Through the very analysis of annual reports of the preschools we looked at a large number of children against a small number of members of the expert service and undeniable and evident burden on members of the expert service. There are no detection instruments, and established procedures to support children. Speech therapy work essentially consists of working with teachers, giving advice and possibly of designing education in the form of workshops for the development of speech and language. The burden on members of the expert service is also considered through their level of agreement with the statement "Too many children are covered by one associate on the field within a preschool." With the above statement 16.7% of the members of the expert service strongly disagrees, 41.7% does not agree, and 41.7% both agrees and disagrees. There is no agreement about this statement although we expected it due to the already presented the factor of the burden in the numbers of annual reports. It is obvious that the members of the expert service on a subjective level do not feel this kind of burden, and show a high degree of indecision regarding thereof. It would be interesting to examine in detail this hypothesis through a detailed analysis of the tasks and responsibilities within their scope of work in the preschool institution. According to a further analysis of the statements of the members of the expert service

we can see that on average, on a monthly basis, teachers seek help in the field about 6 times (minimum two, maximum twenty times). One professional associate conducted the observation of children per call 89 times on average during the research year (minimum twenty, maximum 304 observations). One professional associate in the field observes an average of 12 kindergartens (minimum five, maximum of thirty-three). One associate at a corresponding site visits on average one hundred and fifty groups of children (minimum fourteen, maximum of 712). One professional associate in the field covers an average of 3250 children (minimum 1100, maximum 3800).

### **Analysis of the relationship between the answers of the teachers and the members of the expert service to the statements with the same content**

When analyzing the relationship between the answers of the teachers (57 teachers) and the members of the expert service (12 members of the expert service) to the statements of the same content, only on the basis of the frequency of the answers with a different level of agreement / disagreement, we noticed that there are differences.

Table 7. *Distribution of the results of the relationship between the statements of the teachers and the statements of the members of the expert service*

*“After informing the expert service that I have a problem with a child in a group, the expert service starts the process of observing the child a short term (3 days)” / “Once we get information from teachers that they have a problem with a certain child in a group, we start the process of observing the child in a short term (3 days)”*

	number of respondents	average	standard deviation	standard average error
teachers	57	1.93	1.132	.150
expert service	11	3.18	.603	.182

The results of the t-test showed that there is a statistically significant difference in the answers of the teachers and the expert service ( $t=3.558$ ,  $df=66$ ,  $p=.001$ ).

In the statement “After observing the child, the expert service gives me instructions for working with the child” / “After observing the child, we give instructions to the teachers on how to deal with the child and what adjustments to make” there is a statistically significant difference in the answers of the teachers and the expert service ( $t=-4.418$ ,  $df=67$ ,  $p=.000$ ). The results of the relationship of the statements of the teachers and the members of the expert service: “The expert service gives me a plan on what I should do with the child, and some adjustments that need to be made so that the child can be completely included /After the observation and interviews with parents, we give the teachers a plan that they should follow in their work with the child, and adjustments for the inclusion” also show that there is a statistically significant difference in the responses of the teachers and the expert service ( $t=-2.503$ ,  $df=67$ ,  $p=.000$ ).

Statistical significance within the relationship of the statements about the presence of a special educator as an associate in the preschool, who would facilitate the work with children who exhibit developmental delays, developmental disorders, does not exist. Namely, as to this statement, agreement is achieved between the teachers and the professional associates in a positive direction ( $t=1.173$ ,  $df=72$ ,  $p=.244$ ), as well as on

a similar basis regarding the quality of work and relief in working with children who behave differently ( $T=1.414$ ,  $df=71$ ,  $p=.162$ ). We conclude that both sides, the teachers and the expert service recorded the need to include a special educator in the process of the identification and support of children with disabilities / delays in development, and see their presence as a key to improve work with these children. A special educator as an expert is not present and is not legally prescribed to have their place in the team, except in development groups, where they do their job in the form of implementing individual education plans.

### CONCLUSIONS

- In the existing procedure of preschool institutions there is no procedure for dealing with parents' concerns.
- 77.4 % of the teachers claim that they notice children who are in some way different from average children. Of the total of the observed children, according to the same claims, 77.6 % are sent to the expert service, while 22.4 % of the are not. We conclude that there is a high percentage of children who remain noticed, but not addressed in the further procedure.
- 36.8 % of the teachers does not receive clear instructions, plan and adjustments for working with a particular child, 42.6 % manages on their own according to their knowledge and experience, 75.5 % of the teachers asks their colleagues for advice when there is a problem with a child, 36 % gives up informing the expert service of any problem that they have with children in a group.
- There are significant differences in the responses of the teachers and the expert service as to the beginning of child observation, giving of instructions to a teacher after the child is observed and the approach to the child is adjusted after observation and adjustment of access to the child.
- Teachers and members of the expert service show a high degree of agreement, statistically significant, about the statements regarding the need for a special educator as a professional associates in the preschools. In the process of the identification and support of children with disabilities / delays, they regard the presence of a special educator the key to better work with these children.

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