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COOPERATION BETWEEN THE EDUCATIONAL ASSISTANT AND THE FAMILY AS A PREREQUISITE FOR EFFECTIVE EDUCATIONAL INCLUSION

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Abstract. Inclusive education represents a systemic approach that provides equal opportunities for learning and development of students with special educational needs, wherein the collaboration between the family and the educational assistant plays a key role in ensuring effective and high-quality inclusion. The aim of this study is to examine the nature, quality, and challenges of the collaboration between educational assistants and parents, as well as to identify the factors that enhance this cooperation in practice. The research was conducted using an electronic questionnaire (Google Forms) on a sample of 15 educational assistants from mainstream primary schools in North Macedonia. The analysis includes demographic characteristics, frequency and modes of communication with families, perceived challenges, examples of good practice, and recommendations for improvement. The results show that most assistants maintain regular communication with parents (10 on a daily basis, 4 several times a week), and the collaboration is most often evaluated as excellent or very good. The most common obstacles identified are lack of time, mismatched expectations, distrust, insufficient parental engagement, and linguistic/cultural barriers. Successful practices include daily open communication, joint planning, timely notification about achievements or difficulties, and coordinated support at home and at school. Participants recommend regular training for assistants, stronger professional support, more frequent meetings with parents, and clear guidelines for collaborative work. The study confirms that high-quality and continuous cooperation between educational assistants and families is an invaluable factor for the academic, social, and emotional progress of students with special educational needs. Improving communication skills, strengthening mutual trust, and establishing structures for regular information exchange are essential prerequisites for effective and sustainable inclusion.

Keywords: inclusive education, educational assistants, family, collaboration, support, special educational needs.

СОРАБОТКАТА МЕЃУ ОБРАЗОВНИОТ АСИСТЕНТ И СЕМЕЈСТВОТО КАКО ПРЕДУСЛОВ ЗА ЕФЕКТИВНА ОБРАЗОВНА ИНКЛУЗИЈА

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Апстракт. Инклузивното образование претставува системски пристап кој обезбедува еднакви можности за учење и развој на учениците со посебни образовни потреби, при што соработката помеѓу семејството и образовниот асистент има клучна улога за ефикасна и квалитетна инклузија. Целта на ова истражување е да се испита природата, квалитетот и предизвиците на соработката меѓу образовните асистенти и родителите, како и

да се утврдат факторите што ја унапредуваат оваа соработка во практиката. Истражувањето е спроведено со употреба на електронски прашалник (Google Forms) на примерок од 15 образовни асистенти од редовни основни училишта во Северна Македонија. Анализирани се демографските карактеристики, учестеноста и начинот на комуникација со семејствата, перцепираните предизвици, позитивни практики и препораки за подобрување. Резултатите покажуваат дека повеќето асистенти остваруваат редовна комуникација со родителите (10 секојдневно, 4 неколку пати неделно), при што соработката најчесто се оценува како одлична или многу добра. Како најчести пречки се издвојуваат недостиг на време, неусогласен очекувања, недоверба, недостаток на интерес од страна на родителите, како и јазични/културни бариери. Идентификувани се успешни практики како што се секојдневна отворена комуникација, заедничко планирање, навремено информирање за постигнувања и тешкотии, како и координирана поддршка дома и на училиште. Препораките од испитаниците нагласуваат потреба од редовни обуки за асистентите, засилена стручна поддршка, почеста организација на состаноци со родителите и јасни насоки за заедничка соработка. Истражувањето потврдува дека квалитетната и континуирана соработка помеѓу образовните асистенти и семејствата претставува непроценлив фактор за академскиот, социјалниот и емоционалниот напредок на учениците со посебни образовни потреби. Подобрувањето на комуникациските вештини, зголемената доверба и создавањето структури за редовна размена на информации се клучни предуслови за ефективна и одржлива инклузија.

Клучни зборови: инклузивно образование, образовни асистенти, семејство, соработка, поддршка, специјални образовни потреби.

Introduction

In recent decades, inclusive education has established itself as a generally accepted concept that emphasizes the need for fair, humane and quality education for all children, regardless of their developmental, cultural or social differences. Instead of applying a selective and discriminatory approach, this model advocates for the adaptation of the education system according to the specific abilities and requirements of each student. Inclusion does not only mean physical presence in school, but also real participation, a sense of belonging and mutual respect. Within the framework of this educational transformation, the role of the educational assistant as an operational and supportive figure in the everyday teaching process is becoming increasingly prominent (Agourida, 2024, UNICEF, 2014, Stefanovska, 2022). The assistant not only helps the student with special educational needs, but also mediates between him, teachers, classmates and, especially importantly – his family. The main goal of the support provided by educational assistants is to enable more active inclusion of students in the educational process, thus encouraging the full realization of their developmental potential (MON, 2025). Through the use of cooperative learning and teaching methods, assistants contribute not only to academic progress but also to the development of independence and social integration of students in the school community (Konceptija za iznkluzivno obrazovanje, 2020). Research confirms that educational assistants play an important role in supporting students with disabilities, performing a variety of tasks – from assisting the teacher to individual and group work with students. (Takala, 2007 as cited in Trajkovska Puskas, 2025).

The inclusion of children with special educational needs in the educational process is not only an obligation of society, schools and childcare facilities, but also a significant responsibility for parents. The active participation of parents is a key factor for the successful inclusion of these children in regular educational groups or classes. Such participation presupposes close cooperation and partnership between parents and

educational institutions, as well as with other relevant services and institutions that care for children and their families. The quality of this cooperation depends on the availability of existing structures that enable parental participation, but also on the existence of a culture and mutual cooperation and support. (Meresman, S., 2013:13, as cited in Petrovska and Runcheva, 2019). Collaboration between educational assistants and parents of students with special educational needs is crucial for successful inclusion. It ensures a better understanding of the student's needs, enables timely support, and contributes to his educational and personal development.

Effective collaboration between family and educational assistant: importance and challenges

The collaboration between the family and the school is a vital component in the education of students with special educational needs, as both environments share the common goal of supporting the child's well-being and overall development. According to UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report (2020), successful inclusion of students with disabilities requires parents to be consistently and actively engaged in the educational process. They must receive timely and comprehensive information about all matters related to their child, including their progress as well as the challenges they face within the school environment.

Mitchell (2014) outlines several levels of collaboration between parents and educational assistants, beginning with basic information-sharing, moving through consultation, and extending to full partnership based on shared responsibility for decision-making and the implementation of educational strategies. This approach involves holding regular meetings, establishing clear goals, and defining expectations for everyone involved in the process.

Forms of collaboration may take both formal shapes—such as scheduled meetings, workshops, or sessions for developing an individualized education plan—and informal ones, including brief conversations before or after class or written communication. As Ćwinrkalo and Bartnikowska (2020) point out, effective collaboration also requires the exchange of experiences and ideas, along with building relationships grounded in respect, trust, and open communication (as cited in Trajkovska Puskas, 2025).

Mitchell (2014) emphasizes that parents play a fundamental role in the educational process—not only as sources of valuable information, but also as active participants who have the right to contribute to the development of the educational plan. When mutual understanding and trust are established, this collaboration enhances the student's academic outcomes, social inclusion, and emotional well-being, while also supporting the development of positive habits and skills within the home environment. (Dempsey & Keen, 2008, as cited in Trajkovska Puškaš, 2025).

A well-established collaboration between educational assistants and parents greatly enhances the quality of educational support provided to the student. Hallahan et al. (2014) note that parents possess highly valuable insights into the student's communication style, academic functioning, personal traits, and interests, which enables teachers and educational assistants to tailor their approaches to the learner's individual needs. Such cooperation contributes to more effective and responsive support for the student. (Dempsey & Keen, 2008, as cited in Trajkovska Puškaš, 2025).

Collaboration between the family and the educational assistant is a crucial factor in creating a cohesive, consistent, and supportive environment for a student with disabilities. When mutual trust is established, information is shared openly, and efforts

between parents and the educational assistant are well-coordinated, the conditions become favorable for the child's progress—both academically and in terms of psychosocial development.

- *Continuity and consistency in support.* Coordinated communication between the family and the educational assistant ensures a consistent approach to supporting the student. When the strategies used at school align with those implemented at home, the child adapts more easily and demonstrates improved outcomes.

- *More precise individualization of support.* Parents understand their child best—their routines, needs, emotional responses, and sensitivities. When this information is shared with the educational assistant, the support can be tailored in the most suitable way for the student, resulting in more effective learning and development.

- *Increased emotional stability in the student.* A student feels secure when they perceive a strong connection and mutual support between the people responsible for their care. This sense of security helps the child feel accepted, which enhances confidence and reduces anxiety, especially in group activities.

- *Greater motivation for learning.* When the family is actively involved and collaborates with the assistant, the child interprets this attention and support as recognition of their efforts. This strengthens intrinsic motivation and interest in learning, as the student receives encouragement and positive reinforcement from both home and school.

- *More successful socialization and inclusion.* The educational assistant often acts as a mediator in the student's social interactions. When working in coordination with parents, the assistant can more effectively identify situations that pose challenges in group dynamics and jointly develop strategies that promote the student's integration into the school community.

- *Timely identification and intervention in challenges.* Regular information exchange enables early detection of changes in the child's behavior, learning progress, or emotional well-being. Through collaboration, both parents and the assistant can respond more quickly and provide appropriate support.

- *Strengthening the student's independence.* With continuous and coordinated support, the student is gradually encouraged to take initiative, develop essential skills, and become more independent in completing everyday school tasks. (UNICEF. (2012). Inclusive education: Including children with disabilities in quality learning, Webster, Russell, & Blatchford, 2023).

Challenges and Difficulties

Although collaboration between educational assistants and parents is essential, its practical implementation is often accompanied by various obstacles. Hallahan et al. (2014) note that parents of children with special educational needs frequently experience emotional and practical stress, which can affect their ability and readiness to engage in collaborative efforts. Conversely, teachers and educational assistants are sometimes not fully familiar with the family's specific living conditions and perspectives, which may result in misunderstandings.

Mitchell (2014) emphasizes the importance of fostering a collaborative atmosphere grounded in respect and trust, clearly defining the responsibilities of all parties, and reviewing progress on a regular basis. In addition, educational assistants should be mindful of the professional language and terminology they use to prevent possible misunderstandings. Clear, honest, and open communication forms the foundation for building long-term and effective cooperation that supports the student's overall

functioning and development both at school and at home (Dempsey & Keen, 2008, as cited in Trajkovska Puškaš, 2025).

Despite the importance of cooperation between educational assistants and parents, a range of obstacles frequently appears in practice that can hinder this process. One of the most common challenges is the lack of time—both for parents and educational assistants—which makes it difficult to maintain regular meetings and ongoing communication. Furthermore, low levels of trust between the two parties, particularly during the early stages of collaboration, may result in hesitation and limited information sharing. This issue is often intensified by unclear communication, as educational assistants may unintentionally use professional jargon that parents find difficult to understand. Another significant challenge is the limited training some educational assistants receive in communication skills and working with parents, which can lead to inappropriate approaches and misunderstandings. In certain cases, parents may also display an overly protective attitude, which can restrict the child's autonomy.

Methodological approach

The subject of the research is the cooperation between the family and the educational assistant as a factor that influences the quality of inclusive education for students with special educational needs. The sample consists of 15 educational assistants in regular schools in the Republic of North Macedonia. 15 educational assistants who work with students with special needs participated in the research. According to gender, the majority of respondents are women, that is, 13, while only 2 are men. The age structure of the participants in the research varies from 27 to 55 years. In terms of education level, the majority of respondents have completed higher education, 14 respondents. Most of them have also indicated the faculty they graduated from (graduated from the Faculty of Pedagogy, Faculty of Philology, Faculty of Philosophy, graduate sociologist, graduate art pedagogue). Among them, one educational assistant with postgraduate studies, i.e. a master's degree in psychology, is also recorded. The work experience of educational assistants ranges mainly from 1 to 3 years. We have a total of 5 with up to 1 year of work experience, 5 from 1 to 3 years, and 5 educational assistants with over 3 years of work experience. Regarding the number of students with special educational needs they have worked with so far, respondents stated that 7 of them have supported 1 student each, 3 educational assistants have supported 2 students each, 2 educational assistants have supported 3 students each, 1 educational assistant has supported 4 students and 2 educational assistants have supported 5 students each.

Collaboration with the family

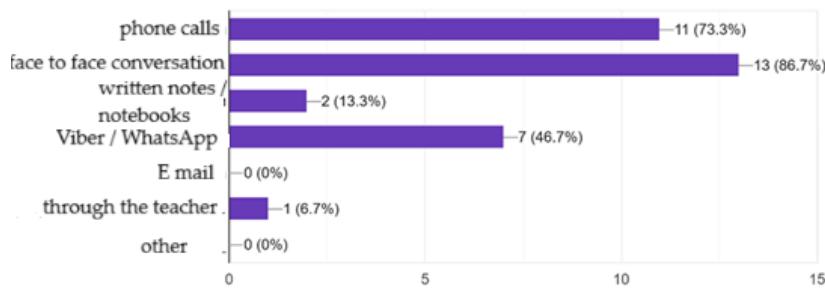


Chart 1. Forms and means of communication with parents

Regarding the communication of educational assistants with the parents of students with special educational needs, 11 assistants responded that it is done through phone calls, 13 assistants responded that it is done through face-to-face conversations, 2 assistants responded that they communicate with parents through written notes, 7 assistants responded that they also communicate with parents on the social networks Viber/WhatsApp and 1 assistant responded that they communicate with parents through the teacher/classroom head.

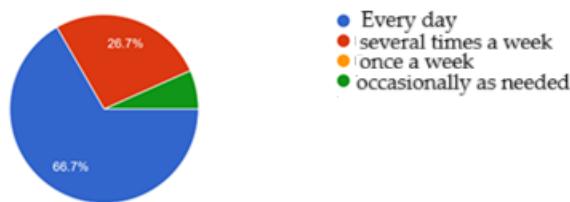


Chart 2. How often do you communicate with the parents of a student with special educational needs?

The educational assistants answered this question that 10 of them communicate with the parents of the student with special needs on a daily basis, 4 of them communicate several times a week, and 1 assistant communicates with the parent occasionally/as needed.

Challenges faced by educational assistants

Educational assistants have listed the following as challenges in communicating with the family of a student with special needs: 4 of them due to lack of time, 1 of them due to distrust or resistance on the part of the parents, 3 of them due to mismatched expectations, 1 of them due to a language/cultural barrier, 2 of them due to parents not showing interest, 2 of them due to other reasons, and 2 respondents did not answer.

Needs to improve cooperation between educational assistants and parents

Educational assistants list several ways for better cooperation with parents, 4 of them state that more training in communication skills is needed, 5 of them that support

from the professional service is needed, 5 of them suggest regular meetings with parents, 1 assistant states that special instructions and materials are needed.

How do you describe your relationship with the parents of students with SEN?

Educational assistants describe their relationship with parents in different ways, 4 of them describe it as an excellent relationship, 2 of them as very good, 2 of them as a fair relationship, 2 of them as a professional, open and direct relationship, accepting positive comments, one of them as a fair relationship, 1 of them answered that the relationship with the parents is so-so and the rest answered that they have a good relationship.

Can you share an example of good practice or successful collaboration with a parent?

Educational assistants have shared several examples of successful collaboration with parents, such as – daily communication, honest approach and joint collaboration, joint efforts for greater progress, regular reporting on problems or achievements, detailed conversation about everything related to the student, careful listening to the parent, cooperation in writing homework, conveying the taught content during class, practicing at home, etc.

What recommendations would you give for improving the role of the educational assistant in collaboration with the family?

Educational assistants' answers	How many of them answered?
To create closeness and trust between the educational assistant and the parents Constant communication	6
It mostly depends on the family	1
No answer	5
Training	3
To have complete trust in the assistants, because only then will the assistant have the freedom to fully dedicate themselves to the student with a disability and to accept the assistant's advice, because after all, he is the one who spends half the day with the student, and knows exactly what he needs to improve his focus and interest in the lesson itself.	1
Centers should explain to families the exact role and duties of the assistant.	1
When parents have realistic expectations of their child, then there will be mutual cooperation that will be at the necessary level.	1

Based on the responses received, it can be concluded that the respondents recognize various factors that contribute to creating a close and trusting relationship between the educational assistant and the families of students with special educational needs. The results show the following:

• Constant communication is the most frequently mentioned answer (6 respondents), indicating that regular and open communication between the educational assistant and parents is crucial for building trust and effective cooperation.

- Training was mentioned as a factor by 3 respondents, suggesting that additional education and information for parents or assistants can improve mutual understanding and cooperation.
- 1 respondent believes that it all depends on the family, emphasizing the importance of parental initiative and engagement.
- 1 respondent indicates that parents should have complete trust in the assistant, since he works directly with the student and can best understand his needs.
- 1 respondent recommends that support centers explain to parents the role and responsibilities of the assistant, which would enable realistic expectations and more effective cooperation.
- 1 respondent emphasizes that realistic expectations on the part of parents are a prerequisite for cooperation at the appropriate level, which shows awareness of the influence of attitudes and expectations on the parent-assistant relationship.
- 5 respondents did not provide an answer, which may indicate insufficient experience, uncertainty in the role, or undefined attitudes regarding the topic.

Conclusion

The findings of this research highlight that collaboration between educational assistants and families plays a crucial role in ensuring quality inclusive education for students with special educational needs. Although most educational assistants report good, very good, or excellent relationships with parents, the quality of cooperation depends on several key factors.

The results show that daily and consistent communication is the strongest predictor of successful collaboration, as confirmed by the majority of participants. Educational assistants most commonly communicate with parents through face-to-face conversations and phone calls, indicating that direct contact remains the most effective method for building trust and maintaining continuity in support.

Despite these positive tendencies, the study also reveals several challenges that hinder cooperation. The most frequently mentioned barrier is lack of time, followed by mismatched expectations, insufficient parental interest, language/cultural differences, and occasional distrust. These difficulties underline the need for clearer communication strategies and better-defined roles and expectations between assistants and families.

The educational assistants emphasize several priorities for improving collaboration, such as the need for training in communication skills, stronger institutional support from school professional services, and regular structured meetings with parents. The participants also highlight that parents' realistic expectations and trust in the assistant significantly contribute to the quality of cooperation.

Overall, the study concludes that effective collaboration requires continuous, transparent, and respectful communication, supported by appropriate training and institutional guidance. When educational assistants and families work in coordination, they create a cohesive and supportive environment that enhances the student's academic progress, social inclusion, and emotional well-being. Strengthening these collaborative

practices remains essential for advancing inclusive education and improving the learning outcomes of students with special educational needs.

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