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EVALUATION OF IMPLEMENTATION AND CONTENT OF THE SELECTED INDIVIDUALIZED PROGRAM FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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Abstract. During our education, each of us met peers who had learning difficulties or who responded in a different and incomprehensible to us way. Children, who today are defined by the single term children with special needs, have a greater chance of being successful, gaining this through the planned introduction of inclusion in our school system. In this way, Slovenian education has opened up space for those children who deviate from what society defines as normal. Everyone deserves inclusion, in the process of which we are interested in the position of people who are considered marginal in a given society. The words ethics, justice and solidarity are associated with the concept of inclusion. Inclusion should go beyond integration, it is not just about physically bringing together children without problems and children with problems, it is about going beyond ideologies. Inclusion is therefore a complex process that cannot succeed overnight. All employees at a school must strive for it, because only with cooperation and acceptance will we take a step forward. An important part of the treatment of a student with special needs is also the preparation of an individualized program. The article explains the creation of an individualized program, the collection of documentation, the recording of a functioning assessment, the planning of goals, evaluations and cooperation in the preparation of the program with professionals, parents, and the child.

Key words: Children with special needs, individualized program (IP), goals, evaluation, cooperation, global assessment.

1. INTRODUCTION

I am currently employed in an elementary school as a school counselor and a teacher of additional professional help, and, when working with students, I encounter tasks that require a lot of theoretical and practical knowledge. One of the most important challenges in my work is the creation of an individualized program, which is the basis for working with students with special needs and it enables the achievement of the principles and goals of the education of children with special needs. These principles are based on equal opportunities with simultaneous consideration of diversity, maintaining a balance between various aspects of a child's physical and mental development, inclusive education, involvement of parents in the process of education, provision of appropriate conditions, timely orientation to an appropriate education program, and individualized approach.

About 600 students attend classes at our primary school, of which approximately 10% are children who have been referred by a decision, approximately 5% of children are still waiting for a decision, and at least 15% of children have learning difficulties, the cause of which are

not deficits in individual areas of learning. It is difficult for me to write down everything that our school does; it is important that the students feel safe and accepted and trust us. All the professionals and the management, who always listen to our problems and the problems of children and parents, deserve this.

2. The theoretical part

2.1. Children with special needs

The word "individualization" is already found in the Dictionary of the Slovenian Literary Language, where it means to change the group, complex treatment of something into an individual one, at the same time emphasizing the characteristics or the characteristics outline of a person as an individual. In the Slovenian *Bela knjiga* (2011), individualization is defined as a didactic principle. This principle requires the teacher and the school to discover, respect and develop fundamental individual differences in the student. With this, they try to individualize learning for students as much as possible, or adapt it to their educational and learning needs, peculiarities and wishes. This enables the student to work independently as much as possible.

Nowadays, the biggest challenge for us teachers is precisely responding to the diverse needs of students. Galeša (1995) sees individualization as a process of adapting various components of upbringing and education based on the individual differences of students, with the aim of optimal development. A particularly sensitive group of students in our school system, who need a great deal of individualization and differentiation, are students with special needs.

2.2. Legal basis

The field of guidance of students with special needs is regulated by the Act on the Guidance of Children with Special Needs (2011, hereinafter ZUOPP), which states that children with special needs are:

- children with intellectual disabilities,
- blind and partially sighted children or children with impaired visual function,
- deaf and hard of hearing children,
- children with speech and language disorders,
- physically challenged children,
- long-term sick children,
- children with deficits in individual areas of learning,
- children with autistic disorders and
- children with emotional and behavioral disorders.

2.3. Tailored Guidance and counselling of special needs children

Even before the start of the guidance process for obtaining a decision and preparation of the IP, the school prepares the Original Work Project of Assistance (hereafter IDPP), which is a kind of a predecessor of the IP, in accordance with the Concept.

Kavkler (2011) says that in 2007, the Professional Council of the Republic of Slovenia for General Education adopted the preparation of the Concept, which lays the professional foundations for the development of more effective approaches in the field of dealing with students with learning difficulties. The concept contains a five-level model of providing learning support to students with learning difficulties. The five-level model of providing learning assistance is based on a continuum of learning difficulties, which range from mild to pronounced. from specific to general, from simple to complex, from short-term to lifelong. from those who require little learning help and support to those who require a lot of specific learning help and support. and to the early treatment of students with learning difficulties. At the 1st level, the child with learning difficulties is mainly provided with the help of the teacher during lessons; at the 2nd level the school counseling service is involved in working with the child. When the problems still persist, the child is offered individual or group learning assistance at the 3rd level; in the case of specific learning difficulties, the help of an external

specialized institution is requested for help with diagnostics (4th level). and only after all the steps have been taken. is it possible for students with pronounced specific learning difficulties or with deficits in individual areas of learning to be directed to an educational program with adapted implementation and additional professional help (step 5).

When the problems are so complex that all the steps of the Concept do not allow the child to progress, the school or the parents, preferably together, initiate the guidance process. According to ZUOPP (2011), the Request for the introduction of the guidance process is completed, and the school also sends an interview with the student, a school report, an IDPP and a completed Concept (or only an IDPP, which covers all items of the Concept) and the already obtained special pedagogical or psychological diagnostic reports. Then the diagnostic procedure begins and the 1st-level commission first prepares an expert opinion, which it forms based on the received school documentation, on the basis of special pedagogical or psychological documentation, and occasionally also through an interview with the parents. According to the received expert opinion, a decision on orientation is formed, and even before that, the school has the possibility of objecting to the contractor. When the school finally sends a response regarding the fulfillment of material and personnel conditions, a valid decision is issued obliging the school to prepare an individualized program.

3. Individualized program

Rodger (1995) in Končar (2003, p. 10) defines the IP as "a written document in which a multidisciplinary team decides on the orientation of a child with disabilities into an appropriate educational program." The IP identifies all areas of the child's needs, including adjustments needed in the classroom and support from various services. The IP is a document that proves that child support has been implemented".

With the possibility of individualizing the learning content, children are given the opportunity to learn more in-depth, complex, more or less abstract learning material or learning content. Here we must mention the modification of the learning process to which we add the pace of treatment and the way of interaction between students and teachers. They are also needed adjustments at the level of products or results, but with individualization the results or products will not be identical for students (Možgon, Ermenc Skubic, Štefanc, Justinek, Meserko, 2015).

An IP is a written guide and plan to meet and fulfill a child's needs. It contains the current level of the child's abilities in development, knowledge and functioning. The IP contains everything that hinders the child's progress, written according to the general curriculum, i.e., annual goals and also smaller steps through which the child will reach these goals. The IP can also include services that the child needs and that are offered to him/her in school or outside school. These services include the services of a speech therapist, special pedagogue, deaf pedagogue, typhologist, physiotherapist, etc. It contains the adjustments that the child will have in the organization of lessons, assessment of knowledge, teaching, and in which knowledge tests the child will not participate in school. The IP must also contain a way to measure the child's progress in achieving the goals and how the parents will be informed about the child's progress and the achievement of the goals written in the child's IP (Jurišić, 2008).

3.1. Legal Requirements

Končar (2003) points out that the decision on the orientation of students with special needs guarantees the right to education according to an individualized program.

IPs are regulated in detail by ZUOPP (2011, Article 36), which states that the educational institution (hereafter elementary school) must create an individualized program for a child with special needs no later than 30 days after the finality of the decision.

ZUOPP (2011, Article 36) stipulates that "the IP in the program with adapted implementation and additional professional assistance determines the organization and implementation of additional professional assistance for:

- overcoming deficits;
- provision of consulting services and
- implementation of learning assistance.

The following are also determined by IP:

- goals and forms of work in individual educational fields;
- strategies for including a child with special needs in the group,
- necessary adjustments in the verification and evaluation of knowledge, achievement of standards and promotion;
- use of adapted and assistive educational technology;
- implementation of physical assistance;
- interpretation in Slovenian sign language;
- transition between programs and necessary adjustments in the organization;
- timing of classes;
- skills for as much independence as possible in life (adaptation skills) and a plan for integration into employment".

Each IP also has a legal limit, because otherwise the record could be delayed for too long, which would not be in the child's best interest. When, despite everything, the IP is not prepared within the statutory period of 30 days after obtaining the decision or enrolling a child in primary school, according to ZUOPP (2011, Article 48), a fine of 1,000 euros is imposed on a legal entity, and a responsible person of a legal entity is fined 200 euros.

At the time of writing the IP, all available documentation about the child is helpful to us professionals, firstly the IDPP and the opinion from SCOMS or medical institutions, and later also the decision and expert opinion. The information given to us by the parents and covering the child's functioning at home and outside of school is very important, as well as the information given to us by the teachers who accompany the student during lessons. We also get a lot of information through individual work with the student, but we can also analyze his/her written products (portfolio), observe them during breaks and during socializing with classmates.

After we have already prepared the IP for the child, our task is to prepare it for the next school year in accordance with the final evaluation at the end of the school year. Pulec Lah (2004) also emphasizes that IP is a process, which means that it is alive and it changes and adapts to the child's current functioning. It must contain various elements of adapting the educational process, such as the speed of advancement, pace of work, organization of implementation, methods and forms of work, and aids and materials.

3.2. Comprehensiveness of the baseline assessment

Končar (2003) emphasizes that a good assessment of the child's functioning is an important basis for planning various adjustments within the educational program.

School IP includes assessment of the following areas:

- ENGINES:

- o gross motor skills;
- o static and dynamic balance;
- o fine motor skills;
- o coordination (eye-hand coordination, eye-foot coordination);
- o partiality;

- COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT:

- o perception (visual perception, auditory perception - auditory discrimination, parsing and memorization);
- o sensory integration;
- o memorization (long-term, short-term and working memory, auditory and visual memory);
- o attention and concentration;
- o orientation (spatial, temporal and quantitative);
- o organization;

- SPEECH, LANGUAGE, COMMUNICATION;
- ACADEMIC SKILLS AND SCHOOL KNOWLEDGE (reading, writing, mathematical knowledge, learning strategies);
- SOCIAL EMOTIONAL AREA:
 - o emotions and self-control;
 - o self-image (school and social);
- INDEPENDENCE, HABITS (hygiene, study and work) AND INTERESTS;
- FAMILY HISTORY.

Areas can be added or removed, depending on the special needs of the child and the achievement of goals in individual areas. The areas described in the IP were designed in the school years ago according to Galeša (1995). In the case of pupils whose special needs relate to sight, hearing, mobility impairment or who have major emotional-behavioral problems, these areas are usually additionally broken down, but this is not necessary in the case of the pupil in question (Nemec in Kranjc, 2011).

3.3. Planning

Pulec Lah (2002) says that when formulating goals, we must start from the finding of the child's functioning in weak areas. From the global assessment, the areas where the child needs special attention are first determined, and then, based on the weaknesses, we try to define what the key goals that the child is able to achieve during the (in our case, annual) development period are. Goals must be specific. Galeša (2003) says that the curriculum can help in setting goals, but the goals must not be the minimum standards of the material in accordance with the curriculum.

In each of our IPs, weak areas are defined in which the student needs help and support from professionals. General objectives are linked to weak areas, and for each general objective some operational objectives (from 2 to 4) are written down. When setting goals, the expert group tries to adhere to the principle of writing a maximum of 6 goals in the IP each year and pursuing them throughout the year. Based on experience, multiple targets have proven difficult to track. The goals must be related to the baseline assessment, as the student's weak areas are the basis for setting goals. Many times, when setting goals, the fact that the goals are not measurable and need to be reformulated is revealed. The goals must also be measurable, as their achievement can be monitored throughout the year and at the end it can also be evaluated whether the goal has been achieved or not.

Adjustments are divided into the following content sections:

- spatial and temporal adjustments;
- didactic aids, study sheets, notebook, homework;
- teaching;
- verification and evaluation;
- directing behavior, motivation, socialization.

Each content set of adjustments contains detailed adjustments that are necessary for a specific student and are directly linked to the global assessment of the individual, his/her special needs and weak areas. The IP clearly shows who the team leader is, who is responsible for the preparation, monitoring and implementation of the IP, who is a member of the team, and who prepared the evaluation that is written down.

The goals, strategies for working with the student, adaptations and global assessment are written by the team in joint cooperation, which means that the DSP teacher, class teacher, subject teachers or OPB teachers, parents, the student, a consultant and, if necessary, experts from an external institution participate in this.

3.4. Evaluation

ZUOPP (2011, Article 36) stipulates that parents and children with special needs must be involved in the preparation and monitoring of the IP. It is necessary to take into account their maturity and age. The IP also needs to be evaluated and changed if necessary.

Galeša (1995) defines evaluation as an integral part of education, without which it is not possible to develop appropriate programs and processes of upbringing and education, and only through evaluation we get feedback on the ongoing correction of this process. Evaluation feedback can significantly influence the child, parents and professionals in the education process. The evaluation of the IP is crucial, because through it we find out whether the child has achieved the goals and why they haven't. We are interested in the child's progress.

Galeša (1995) emphasizes that the impact of evaluation can be both positive and negative. With positive influences, we can solve the educational needs of children, but in the case of negative influences of evaluation, it is necessary to act professionally in accordance with it. It often happens that it is necessary to offer help to parents as well, as data can be misinterpreted or it is difficult to help their child at home; they often do not even understand them, as it is difficult for them to empathize with their functioning. At that time, we have to be especially sensitive when working with parents, it is necessary to offer them concrete help and strategies on how to act when working with the child; with accusations and anger we quickly lose trust on their part.

The time limit for the evaluation in ZUOPP (2011) is not specified; at our elementary school it is a practice to meet with the parents and the child three times a year. In the month of September or In October, there is an introductory meeting where we agree on the work for the current school year, confirm the schedule and providers of additional professional help and parents, and introduce the student to the new class teacher and teachers. Let's agree on adjustments in individual cases and check what did not work well in the previous year. Let's also agree on which goals we will pursue for the child this school year.

At the end of the year, generally in May or in June, a final evaluation is carried out, where it is determined which strategies worked and which did not, we check the achievement of the goals and what the evaluation of the student's functioning at the end of the school year is.

Based on the evaluation, suggestions for the next school year are also made, a new assessment of the student's functioning is made, and we agree again on the goals that we will pursue in the next school year. The areas that the child is currently reaching or record the progress. We review how we implemented additional professional help, which methods were appropriate and what did not work well. If necessary, changing the goal also changes the provider who helps the child achieve the goal. All participants (professionals, students and parents) are present at each evaluation, because only with joint cooperation can we make IP work in practice, and we all have to agree with what is written.

3.5. The process of IP implementation and the role of parents and students in the process

ZUOPP (2011, Article 37) determines the expert group responsible for the preparation of the IP. In order to prepare and monitor the implementation of the IP, the principal of the elementary school appoints a professional group consisting of professionals who will participate in the implementation of the educational program.

At our elementary school, the expert group for the preparation of the IP includes the teacher of additional professional assistance, the class teacher, the student, the student's parents, and, if necessary, the school counseling service and teachers of other subject areas or extended stay teachers. When the treatment takes place in parallel also in external institutions, an important part of the team is also clinical psychologists, child psychiatrists, case managers at Social Work Centers, etc. In such cases, the treatment is multidisciplinary. The preparation of the IP takes place in such a way that the student is accompanied before and during guidance by various professionals and parents who, in accordance with the IDPP Concept, record an overview of the child's functioning, help and adaptations, as well as weak and strong areas of the student. During the one-month preparation of the IP, the student's global assessment is expanded, concrete and measurable goals for the annual period are also added, which are prepared by professionals together with parents. The goals are then presented to the student as well. Each of us then takes responsibility for achieving

the goals, and the student must also take his/her share of responsibility. We also write down which of the professionals will help the student achieve his/her goals.

However, joint meetings are not always so easy. Končar (2003) also points out that the parents of a student with special needs go through different stages of accepting the child and therefore react differently in different stages. Even professionals at schools are aware that parents are often burdened by their child's problems and failures. They sometimes avoid cooperation with professionals, although in my experience this does not happen often in practice. Most of the time, communication problems arise due to the different attitudes of parents and professionals towards the child. I myself notice that the most difficult part is the coordination of the global assessment and the general functioning of the student, because the parents are faced with a large number of deficits in the child at once by professionals. That is why it is necessary to equip parents with knowledge during the child's schooling and to offer them help and support, as this is the only way they can successfully participate in the composition of the IP. It is not in the interest of any of us to just sign the program, as we have not done anything good for the child by doing so. The most important thing is that during schooling, parents notice the progress of the child, no matter how small it may be. Their ideas and critical comments must be heard and proposals included in the IP, and they must also actively participate in evaluations. Only in this way can mutual trust and cooperation develop, where parents will share information from the intimate family environment with experts in a relaxed environment, which will significantly contribute to the formation of a global assessment.

When including a student in a team, a great deal of care and sensitivity is required, as functioning in a team also depends on the student's age and maturity. According to our experience, students can be an equal part of the team from the 4th grade onwards, but when preparing the global assessment, it is not read in its entirety, but due to professional terms, the reading is adapted to the child.

4. Conclusion and reflection

Legislation clearly defines the legal rights of children with special needs and mandates inclusion in education. This obligates professionals in educational institutions to provide adequate assistance to children with special needs. As a team, we always cooperate in choosing specific goals for each child, as it is difficult to find a suitable goal, which is also the most difficult task in the process of creating an IP. We must not forget to evaluate the IP, as this includes the evaluation of the whole, retrospective data that is already collected in the initial phase, so this evaluation is carried out in the later phases of a certain project (Kobal Tomc et al., 2019). The main purpose of summative or final evaluation is to determine whether the student has mastered the program in which he/she is included. With it, we check whether the student can advance to a higher class at school, or whether they can be included in another educational program. It gives us a global assessment of whether the student has progressed functionally. We use different instruments for it, which are usually of a global or general nature. These include final exams, differential exams, diploma exams, etc.

Individual work with children is the most beautiful part of my job. It can be really tiring, especially when I meet children who have already developed strong defense mechanisms, low self-esteem, oppositional behavior; some of them are facing psychological problems or a difficult family situation. Sometimes, in addition to the role of teacher or additional professional help, you also have to perform the role of substitute parent, confidant, psychologist, and with interventions you can greatly intervene in the family, while you must not lose the trust of either the student or the family. This kind of work requires a lot of caution, sensitivity, understanding, and compassion.

One of the things that can ease the daily hardships in the school process for children with special needs is a well-made IP, which is consistently followed by all team members.

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