

Croatian Journal of Education  
Vol.20; Sp.Ed.No.3/2018, pages: 133-155  
Preliminary communication  
Paper submitted: 26<sup>th</sup> January 2018  
Paper accepted: 13<sup>th</sup> November 2018  
<https://doi.org/10.15516/cje.v20i0.3066>

# Perception of Teachers and Expert Associates on the Application of the Individualized Approach in Working with Students with Disabilities

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## Abstract

*The National Curriculum for Preschool Education, General Compulsory and Secondary School Education in the Republic of Croatia emphasizes individualized approach and support according to the needs, interests and the overall development of each individual child. This implies assessment, planning and implementation of various teaching support strategies so that the educational process can be effective for all children. As the world's research about the effectiveness of work of experts in inclusive educational practice points out the importance of basic principles and strategies of work (Ford, 2013; Martel, 2009; Obiakor, Harris, Mutua, Rotatori, & Algozzine, 2012; Scruggs, Mastropieri, & Marshak, 2012), the need for self-assessment of professionals who are involved in direct work with children with disabilities in using individualized strategies, resources, forms and procedures in the educational process is emphasized. Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine the extent to which teachers and expert associates in regular primary schools estimate that the individualized approach is present, and in what form, in working with students with disabilities in the educational process. The study included 345 teachers and 40 expert associates employed in regular primary schools in Zagreb and in the area of Zagreb County. There is a hypothesis that there are statistically significant differences between teachers and expert associates in the assessment of the presence of the appropriate didactic and methodological support for the implementation of the individualized approach in class. The results indicate partial differences between the teachers and the expert associates that are reflected in their perception of adaptability of incentives,*

*perceptive and cognitive adaptation of content as well as in planning procedures and activities for students with disabilities. These results point to the need for continuous professional training so that teachers and expert associates can develop the necessary specific competences and new teaching support strategies in class.*

**Key words:** *competitive educational professionals; didactic and methodological support; educational strategies; inclusive educational process.*

## Introduction

The individualized approach is one of the basic principles and values needed to implement an inclusive educational practice (*The Framework for Encouraging and Adapting the Experience of Learning and Assessment of the Results of the Children and Students with Disabilities*, 2016) which stresses the differences in abilities and needs, and it is natural and necessary in every contemporary society. From that aspect, the aim of educational inclusion is to create the capacity to accept and decrease exclusion on any basis (Acedo, 2008; Booth & Ainscow, 1998; Sebba & Sachdev, 1997). Some authors (Igrić & associates, 2015, as cited in Ivančić & Stančić, 2002; Kiš-Glavaš, 2012) state that the form of teaching support strategies within the frame of the individualized support of students with disabilities<sup>1</sup> on the level of each school implies material and technical, staff-organizing, psychological and pedagogical, didactic and methodological and social support. Special teaching strategies are proven to be effective in educating children with disabilities using activities such as word analysis skills task and peer tutoring as well (Singh, 2012). Westwood (2003) states that, in working with students with disabilities by using the strategies which hold the student's attention for tasks and activities, effective teachers adapt their teaching to the individual needs of the students. They have well-organized and well-run classrooms, provide the students with a maximum opportunity to study, have high expectations about what the students can achieve, they are enthusiastic and motivated, present the content to the students gradually, apply direct and explicit directions, use clear instructions and explanations, and carefully monitor what the students are doing. The same author also states that in inclusive classrooms effective teachers explain the material again when it is necessary and provide the students with fast feedback. Due to the fact that individualized teaching in class is perceived as a concept that each student can learn, if approached individually, teachers can be successful if they apply effective teaching methods. Therefore, in the individualized approach, the teacher is the one who is responsible for teaching the students and one can apply the following: "If the student has not learned, the teacher has not taught" (Tarver, 1999).

<sup>1</sup> *Students with disabilities* as a term in education in the Republic of Croatia is stated in the Act on Education and Primary and High School (NG, br. 87/08, 86/09, 92/10, 105/10, 90/11, 5/12, 16/12, 86/12, 126/12, 94/13 and 152/14), and includes those students with disabilities in development, students with learning difficulties, behavioural problems and emotional problems as well as students with disadvantages conditioned by educational, socio-economic and cultural factors.

Marchand-Martella, Slocum, and Martella (2004) specify that planning and realization of the programme/curriculum, organization of the lesson and mutual interaction between the teacher and students with disabilities are the three main components which are significant to successfully realize the individual, educational programme/curriculum. According to Ivančić (2010), the main competences of the teacher in working with students with disabilities refer to planning and programming, preparation, teaching and evaluating the results within the framework of the student-directed curriculum. Staničić (2006) claims that the significant indicators of the human potential in school refer to the quality of knowledge that each person has, his/her skills, abilities, creativity, work motivation, readiness for improvement and professional development and such. Therefore, it is necessary to constantly monitor the level of competences of each individual with regard to their quality. In accordance with that, he specifies that the expert associates (in Croatian schools the term traditionally refers to school pedagogists, psychologists and education and rehabilitation experts) are a specific type of educators whose basic task in cooperation with other types of experts, teachers and headmasters is to encourage internal development and contribute to the improvement of teaching and school results. Therefore, teachers should be enabled and monitored in the planning of lessons which are aimed at the needs of the students, by using those teaching methods which enable all students to develop their own abilities. In practice, however, teachers often lack experience in the methods of planning and in the adaptation of individual curriculums as well as in the implementation of new teaching methods.

In today's time of reforms and the tendency for quality changes, there is an awareness that the goals of national education cannot be achieved without taking the responsibility for the achieved results and the evaluation of the goals of those who must realize those goals in schools. This primarily refers to teachers and expert associates, and lately also increasingly to headmasters. The importance of recognizing and using their knowledge and skills in our schools is specified, as well as the monitoring and guidance of their professional development (Committee for the programme design – Staničić, Puškar, Hitrec, Jurić Mrša, Stilin, Marković, Galinović, Kapac, Šutalo, & Rogač, 2005). Research conducted throughout the world shows that we can have better development of the inclusive practice in those schools that have common planning, cooperation, mutual help, supplementation and clear and honest communication (Ainscow, 1995; Flego, 2000). In accordance with that, successful education systems, as well as successful primary schools at a micro level, pay special attention to individual support, not only to students with disabilities and gifted students, but to all students. This indicates that one of the more important things to know and skills to have for today's teachers is precisely teaching students with disabilities based on the new methods in inclusive classrooms. On the basis of the ESD – Education for Sustainable Development model, Bertschy, Künzli, and Lehmann (2013) explain the issue regarding which competences the teachers need to acquire in

order to professionally develop in the field of education for ESD, so that they can be competent and can realize educational goals with their students. The same authors specify that this refers to the issue of acquiring the right competences in the primary, initial education of the teachers and then later during their further education. With regard to that, Lončarić and Pejić Papak (2009, p. 13) indicate that “the goal of teaching directed at the student and the results of teaching which are guidelines for what the student needs to know and will be able to do at the end of the module or programme are founded in the study programmes based on the development of key and specific competences”. Namely, it is precisely the EDS model which indicates the required specific professional competences which refer to the planning, implementation and evaluation of ESD classes, and the classification of abilities with regard to the number of competence components (for example, with regard to professionalism, it is manifested differently with newly hired staff). The authors also believe that teacher self-assessment is needed in the realization of teaching, class and study methods.

Casner Lotto and Barrington (2006) claim that, for quality work in the education system, among the most important skills and fields of knowledge of professionals are (1) professionalism and work ethics, (2) team work and cooperation, and (3) spoken communication.

Vizek Vidović (2009) singles out specific competences of teachers in working with students with disabilities such as competence in implementing different teaching and study strategies and counselling ability (with students and parents) on various educational issues and developmental problems. Therefore, what is most important is to observe the continuity or discontinuity of the implementation of the appropriate content, work methods, types, means, and aides as well as checking the competence and therefore that potential as objectively as possible (Kudek Mirošević & Jurčević Lozančić, 2014). Practice has also shown that what adds to greater preparation for accepting children with disabilities in the regular system are methodological and didactic aspects of work, namely having lessons properly planned, prepared and choosing the appropriate work methods and evaluation of results and outcomes (Jurčević Lozančić & Kudek Mirošević, 2015).

Forlin and Chambers (2011), by observing the statement that nowadays more and more students with disabilities are educated within the regular educational institutions, surveyed the teachers to see how they see their role with regard to the needs of inclusive practice. The results showed that teachers were positively inclined in working with students who, due to the mild level of disability needed relatively little individualized support, while the teachers provided less necessary support to those students with a higher level of disability in development. After that, the same teachers had training on inclusive topics which was continued with a repeated survey of the same teachers. The new results showed that the teachers had a significantly more positive attitude towards inclusion of students with disabilities, although they did express a need for assistance as well as additional support with students who are physically aggressive, that is those showing specific types of behavioural problems.

Considering that at the level of the whole school, the planning of individualized teaching of students with disabilities is not the responsibility of the individual, but divides responsibilities among school team members (teacher, expert associates, principal, parent), some of the important development and pedagogical tasks of expert associates in school are monitoring and improving lessons, working with children with disabilities, personal professional development as well as organizing professional development for teachers and analysing the realized educational results of the school (Staničić, 2005, 2011). According to Milsom (2006), numerous researchers (Lieberman, James, & Ludwa, 2004; Pavri, 2004; Schepis, Reid, Ownbey, & Clary, 2003) recommend the role of expert associates for training in the promotion of collaborative relationships between students with disabilities and students without disabilities. They say that successful interaction between those students often does not come naturally, but rather the teacher must be able to successfully enable this interaction if he/she wants the students with disabilities to be included with their peers. In accordance with this, one can conclude that along with the expert associates, the role of the teacher is to create optimal conditions for complete development of the personality of the students and create a stimulating environment for successful learning of each student, that is, to assess, create, encourage and guide their work in accordance with the students' needs and developmental potential (Staničić, 2011). This is the reason for the appropriate didactic and methodological support required at all stages of the teaching process. Didactic and methodological support refers to planning and adaptation of appropriate teaching strategies (methods, tools, forms, procedures), and learning and teaching activities (Igrić & associates, 2015; Ivančić & Stančić, 2002, 2006; Stančić, Kiš-Glavaš, & Urbanc, 2014). This results in the fact that the use of the right teaching strategies can improve the results of students with disabilities. The teacher therefore must have a wide spectrum of possibilities in implementing various methods which are used to enable each student to be successful according to their abilities and capabilities (Baker, 2005).

Based on this, *Professional Training Strategy for the Professional Development of Educators 2014-2020*, prescribes activities referring to the development and improvement of competences of the educator which support quality learning and teaching that should be in accordance with the student's competences. Namely, in Croatia, the teacher's competences have not yet been defined on a national level and there is no common understanding of teacher competences. There are various concepts and groups of competences which are debated in various institutions and included in the education of the teacher. The latest come from the EU initiative *Rethinking Education*, under the heading "Required Competences for Effective Teaching in the 21<sup>st</sup> century", where the competences are placed into three groups: knowledge and understanding, skills and dispositions: beliefs, opinions, values and dedication (*Professional Training Strategy for the Professional Development of Educators 2014-2020*).

## Research Problem and Aim

According to the *Constitution of the Republic of Croatia and the Act on Education in Primary and High School* (National Gazette, 87/2008, 86/2009, 92/2010, 105/2010, 90/2011, 5/2012, 16/2012, 86/2012, 126/2012, 94/2013 and 152/2014) all children/students are ensured free and appropriate education according to their abilities and possibilities, including children/students with disabilities. The Act prescribes that the students who have needs for individualized support in learning should be educated together with their peers for the most part (*Framework for Encouraging and Adapting the Experience of Learning and Assessment of the Results of the Children and Students with Disabilities*, National Gazette, 2016).

The *National Framework Curriculum for Preschool Education and General Obligatory and High School Education* (2010) also stresses the importance of ensuring an environment which enables and provides students with support to develop into people who fully realize their own potential and who are prepared for furthering their education, work and life-long learning. In accordance with this, it is vital that our schools ensure the right and proper educational support in order for the students with disabilities to realize their full potential, set up educational goals, expectations and outcomes.

Regarding individualized teaching, the key for quality inclusion of students with disabilities in all class activities together with the students without disabilities, is self-assessment and self-criticism of the teacher in order to enable high quality lessons. With regard to this, *The Strategy of Education, Science and Technology* (2014, p. 77) states that “A high-quality teacher is perceived as a person who realizes a stimulating learning environment, recognizes and considers the needs and interests of the students and adapts his/her teaching to the individual abilities of the students. The teacher has competences which help him/her encourage each child to reach high level educational potential as a foundation for the realization of his/her life and professional potential”. Furthermore, the Strategy points out one of the most effective ways of improving the quality of the education intervention system on the school level, which is aimed at the student in order to achieve a mechanism for identifying learning disabilities and providing additional support to students, which helps them improve their accomplishments. Therefore, the Strategy states (according to Barber & Mourshed, 2007, p. 94) that “...successful education systems as well as successful schools (on a micro level) pay special attention to individual support for students...”

Based on that, the principles of learning and teaching defined by the *National Framework Curriculum* (2010) apply to all students, and those which apply specifically to students with disabilities stress the importance of teaching which is aimed at the entire development and well-being of the student, the correlation of teaching strategies with his/her life experience and interests, and clear and high expectations regarding his/her individual abilities and possibilities. In order for the school to appropriately adapt to the new and complex social circumstances, the contemporary teacher of the

21<sup>st</sup> century and expert associates in schools should additionally expand the repertoire of their professional competences, which include the development of new teaching strategies and also the ability to critically observe their practice with regard to the students' accomplishments and adapt it to students' needs (European Commission, 2012).

In accordance with the above mentioned, **the aim** of this paper is to find out how much teachers and expert associates in regular primary schools assess whether, in what form, and to what extent individualized approach by the teacher is present in working with students with disabilities.

As, according to *The State Pedagogic Standard of the Primary School System of Education* (National Gazette ed. 63/2008), expert associates are professionally qualified for helping teachers in class perform the tasks stemming from the pedagogic work or are connected to it and provide educational and rehabilitation support, the research arises from the **hypothesis** that there is a statistically significant difference between teachers and expert associates in the assessment of the representation of the appropriate didactic and methodological support for the implementation of the individualized approach in class.

## Methods

### *Participants*

The research was conducted on a sample of the total of 385 subjects. The research included 345 teachers from first to eighth grade of regular primary school and 40 expert associates (pedagogists, education and rehabilitation experts and psychologists), also from the same regular primary schools (31 of them) from the area of Zagreb and Zagreb county. The sample of the subjects taught by the teachers and expert associates was formed randomly. According to the announcement by the Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Croatia and the available data at the end of the school year 2014/2015, a total of 2152 expert associates were employed in state primary schools in the Republic of Croatia. Namely, data state that at the beginning of the school year 2015/2016 from the total of 2125 state primary schools in the Republic of Croatia, 129 were in Zagreb county and 144 in the city of Zagreb, which makes a total of the largest number of state primary schools, so it may be proposed that the largest number of expert associates in the Republic of Croatia are employed in those schools. In that sense, the primary schools from the two cited counties were used as samples for this research.

Jurić, Mušanović, Staničić, and Vrgoč (2001, p. 9) state that numerous empirical studies confirm, regardless of certain weaknesses that accompanied the inclusion of expert associates in the educational institutions, that the expert associates in schools “had a positive influence on raising the quality of teaching practice through their work and that they significantly contributed to the development and improvement of the education process.” The same authors, furthermore, state that those schools in

which the expert associates are not represented sufficiently, activities such as those referring to monitoring quality planning and programming of the work in class (by using professional analyses of the achieved results) as well as identification of and monitoring work with students with disabilities in learning and psychophysical improvement do not achieve or insufficiently realize these activities.

Therefore, the results of monitoring this work and analysing the education process by expert associates can significantly and clearly show the realization of teaching situations in schools that have expert associates (provided they are guided in an appropriate pedagogical manner) than those who do not have them. In that way the teaching can be monitored succinctly and self-assessment of the work encouraged, in addition to the implementation of contemporary methodological and didactic solutions, in order to provide appropriate support for the students with disabilities.

### **Instrument**

A *Questionnaire for teachers on the implementation of the methods of adaptation and individualized procedures in working with students with disabilities* and a *Questionnaire for expert associates on the implementation of the methods of adaptation and individualized procedures in working with students with disabilities* were designed. Each questionnaire consists of two equal parts. The first part of each questionnaire refers to the socio-demographic characteristics of the subjects, namely the subjects anonymously provided information with regard to their sex, how much work experience they have had in the education system and the level of their professional qualification where the teachers could choose between higher education and a college degree. The second part of the questionnaire comprises 25 statements that is, variables, for which the teachers and expert associates chose the following values 1-never, 2-rarely, 3-sometimes, 4-often, 5-regularly, on a five-point ordinal scale. At the beginning of the questionnaire, there are instructions informing teachers and expert associates that the questionnaire is anonymous and that by completing it they will contribute to the research of contemporary inclusive practice and should therefore keep their answers open and honest.

The claims, or variables, in the second part of the questionnaire are based on the legal procedures in the education system of the Republic of Croatia, that is *The Rulebook on Primary and High School Education in Educating Students with Disabilities* (National Gazette, no. 24/2015), according to which during their education students with disabilities realize the right to appropriate education programmes and appropriate types of assistance.

The Rulebook establishes for students with disabilities that such appropriate programmes and forms of education be realized with programme and professional support and pedagogic and didactic adaptation (art. 2), and that the appropriate education programme, the lesson plan and/or curriculum which enables educational progress of the student with respect to the specificities of the student's established



Table 1

*Descriptive statistics – descriptive variables*

Variables	N	Range	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis		
	Stat.	Stat.	Stat.	Stat.	Stat.	Stat.	Stat.	SE	Stat.	SE
<b>V1</b> are educated enough to work.	385	4	1	5	3.46	.892	-.052	.124	-.351	.248
<b>V2</b> know their educational needs.	384	4	1	5	3.78	.795	-.209	.125	-.255	.248
<b>V3</b> focus on their positive sides, strong points of the students...	382	4	1	5	4.32	.713	-.915	.125	1.003	.249
<b>V4</b> during class, they are patient, gentle and full of understanding because of the emotional problems that the student has.	385	3	2	5	4.38	.660	-.881	.124	.831	.248
<b>V5</b> realize remedial teaching.	377	4	1	5	4.20	1.133	-1.373	.126	.948	.251
<b>V6</b> apply simple, clear teaching resources without many details (i.e. applications, pictures, drawings, maps, schemes...).	385	4	1	5	4.07	.817	-.759	.124	.717	.248
<b>V7</b> adapt texts/font (bigger spaces between words, sentences, text lines, increase the font, summarize texts...).	384	4	1	5	3.77	.979	-.556	.125	-.092	.248
<b>V8</b> highlight tasks, rules and significant information by underlining it.	381	4	1	5	3.98	.930	-.742	.125	.299	.249
<b>V9</b> shorten texts by extracting important entries from the content or important facts, decreasing the number of facts.	384	4	1	5	4.00	.866	-.661	.125	.210	.248
<b>V10</b> simplify the content of the text, adapt the text by using simple expressions.	383	4	1	5	3.81	.923	-.570	.125	.103	.249
<b>V11</b> plan contents with additional pictures, shortened questions or fewer questions, simplified schematic displays.	384	4	1	5	3.85	.898	-.575	.125	.074	.248
<b>V12</b> separately plan the lesson due to group activities and adapt to the students with disabilities in the activity.	382	4	1	5	3.55	.976	-.406	.125	.001	.249
<b>V13</b> test their understanding of what was said in class.	384	4	1	5	4.07	.797	-.863	.125	1.352	.248
<b>V14</b> believe it is important to repeat the significant parts of the lesson.	382	4	1	5	4.45	.711	-1.283	.125	1.862	.249
<b>V15</b> apply individualized class sheets to establish, repeat and practice the material.	380	4	1	5	3.96	.971	-.743	.125	.138	.250
<b>V16</b> give the students extra time to work on a task.	384	4	1	5	4.62	.691	-2.338	.125	7.236	.248
<b>V17</b> apply oral exams of the learned material over written exams to those students who need it most.	382	4	1	5	4.45	.758	-1.660	.125	3.513	.249
<b>V18</b> apply written exams of the learned material over oral exams to those students who need it most.	378	4	1	5	4.21	.946	-1.346	.125	1.747	.250
<b>V19</b> plan a system of stimulating procedures and activities with the goal of making the student's interests, will and desire for school requirements and obligations stronger.	382	4	1	5	3.92	.846	-.639	.125	.497	.249
<b>V20</b> plan the learning contents according to the student's results of the initial test.	379	4	1	5	3.84	.997	-.810	.125	.495	.250
<b>V21</b> plan and organize assistance in class with those peers in their class who have no disabilities.	382	4	1	5	3.59	1.013	-.428	.125	-.240	.249
<b>V22</b> in my school praise students with disabilities even for the smallest effort that they show.	381	3	2	5	4.55	.629	-1.227	.125	.983	.249
<b>V23</b> in my school hold workshops (and or participate as subject teachers) on topics of acceptance and differences among students.	382	4	1	5	3.34	1.185	-.340	.125	-.645	.249
<b>V24</b> in my school believe that students with different abilities should participate in the same class.	381	4	1	5	3.77	.947	-.321	.125	-.408	.249
<b>V25</b> in my school do not have enough time for students with disabilities because of the overload of requirements in class.	382	4	1	5	3.55	.973	-.415	.125	-.041	.249

disability, and the specifics of his/her functioning and educational needs. This type of programme can be adapted to the student with regard to the content and methodology (art. 6, Rulebook), as the Rulebook namely states individualized procedures when working with students with disabilities are necessary because of the specificities of such students in their functioning. They enable various forms of support according to the student's needs and regarding to: the independence of the student, time of the lesson, work methods, checking the skills, knowledge and abilities of the student; monitoring and assessing the results of the student; activity of the student, technical, didactic and/or rehabilitation means for work and the appropriate space conditions (art. 5, Rulebook).

The main descriptive scale values are shown in Table 1. The reliability of the questionnaire was tested by the method of internal consistency, Cronbach's alpha = 0.883.

### ***Method of Data Collection and Processing***

The research was conducted in the second term of the school year 2015/2016. From the values of the descriptive statistics shown in Table 1, one can conclude that the measures of the central tendency are relatively high, which implies that the teachers and expert associates positively assess the level of representation of the individualized approach with students with disabilities in their school, that is they assessed a relatively good frequency of applying teaching methods, tools, forms and procedures in the individualized approach with students with disabilities. Such results indicate that the teachers have certain competences in organizing educational activities in class, and they use certain teaching methods, tools, forms and procedures when working with students with disabilities. Namely, as one can see from the data in Table 1, variable (V16) has the highest statistic mean, which indicates that the teachers provide support to students with disabilities by giving them extra time to complete a task in class. Variable (V22) follows and it refers to the presence of encouragement to students with disabilities by the teacher in the sense of praising them even for the smallest effort that they show. The next is variable (V14) at a relatively high position, which refers to the fact that teachers believe it is important to repeat the relevant material of the lesson. It is followed by variable (V17), which refers to the fact that teachers apply oral exams over written exams for those students who need it most. This is followed by variable (V4), which indicates that the teachers have more patience, are gentler and full of understanding for students with emotional problems; and variable (V3), stating that the teachers focus on the positive characteristics, the strong points of the students. The results further show a relatively high measure of central tendency for variable (V18), which refers to giving students written exams over oral exams if the student needs that; as well as variables (V5), stating that the teacher realizes remedial work with students with disabilities through individualized approach; (V13) testing student's understanding of the material spoken in class; (V9) shortening texts by

extracting the main points of the content or important facts, decreasing the number of facts; and (V6) indicating that they apply simple, clear class material without many details (applications, pictures, drawings, maps, schemes...).

Variable (V23) has the lowest statistic mean, from which one can conclude that teachers do not spend enough time at workshops (and/or participate as subject teachers) on topics of acceptance and differences between students. This is followed by variables (V1), which indicates that expert associates see teachers, and the teachers perceive themselves as not educated enough for working with students with disabilities; variable (V12), indicating that there is not enough planning of activities that would help students with disabilities participate in class activities better; and variable (V25), which refers to the opinions of teachers and expert associates that the teachers in their schools, due to the class work overload, do not have enough time for students with disabilities.

Following the obtained results, it is reasonable to ask a question regarding the degree of regular individual professional training of teachers and expert associates for obtaining new specific competences necessary for teachers to work in class with students with disabilities. Also, the question is to what extent quality lesson planning is represented under the conditions which schools nowadays demand for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when there are more and more complicated demands placed on the teacher. With regard to realization of quality lessons in schools, are we talking about competent experts who are looking for new paths in their field of work and who want to use creativity and new strategies in their classes to realize their role for the different needs of their students, or are we talking about teachers who merely rely on contemporary knowledge and skills? This is an issue that numerous studies and authors throughout the world deal with, such as Ford (2013); Martel (2009); Obiakor, Harris, Mutua, Rotatori, and Algozzine (2012); Scruggs, Mastropieri, and Marshak (2012), who talk about the significance of the basic principles and strategies in working with students with disabilities, the need to acquire and apply new knowledge and skills and fast, efficient and creative action in the classroom, as well as the importance of individualization and adaptation in class that students with disabilities demand.

Apart from descriptive indicators and within inferential statistics for testing the differences between teachers and expert associates, the nonparametric Mann-Whitney U test was used for testing the significances between the two independent samples. The data gained through the research were processed with an SPSS-23 statistics package.

## **Results and Discussion**

In order to test the hypothesis, that is to determine the differences between teachers and expert associates the Mann-Whitney nonparametric test was used. The direction of differences for individual variables shown in Table 2 indicates that teachers' assessment of their work with students with disabilities is better than the expert

associates' assessment of their work, and this refers to the following variables: (V3), stating that the teachers focus on the positive characteristics, the strong points of the students with disabilities; (V4) indicating that during the lesson the teachers have extra patience, are more gentle and more understanding towards students with emotional problems; (V10) suggesting that they simplify the texts according to content, using simpler expression and making the text less difficult; (V13) pointing out that they test their understanding of what was said in class; (V14) denoting that they believe it is important to repeat the significant contents covered in class; (V19) specifying that they plan a system of stimulating procedures and activities to strengthen the student's interest, will and desire for school demands and obligations; (V22) indicating that they praise students even for the smallest effort. Therefore, the results from Table 2 imply that expert associates know the nature of the education process and the importance of professional realization of the school programme more thoroughly. In accordance with this is one of the most important conditions for improving the work of the school, which is the existence of activities of the entire team of specialized experts who encourage internal development and cooperation with the teachers.

However, because the expert associates, in order to raise the quality of the lessons in school, do not realize pedagogical innovations formally but rather professionally; they analyse its implementation professionally and assess the achieved level (Jurić et al., 2001). According to that, the results on the remaining variables based on which one can see that the teachers had a more positive attitude about how to implement individualized approach in class, that is significant didactic and methodological issues in working with students with disabilities and the realization of individual tasks while making plans also support this.

The results obtained on the following variables and which refer to the fact that teachers (V6) apply simple, clear class material without many details (i.e. applications, pictures, maps, schemes...); (V7) adapt font/texts (increase spaces between words, sentences, lines of text, increase the font, summarize texts...); (V8) stress tasks, rules and significant information by underlining it; (V9) shorten texts by extracting important details of the content or important facts, decreasing the number of facts; (V12) especially plan the lesson for group activities in which students with disabilities need to participate; (V17) apply oral exams of the learned material over written exams for those students who need it most; (V20) plan contents of teaching according to the students' results of the initial tests, and (V21) plan and organize support in class from peers who do not have disabilities.

Such results can be justified because the expert associates constantly monitor the lessons and stress to the teachers the need for individualization of school demands for students with disabilities in the sense of making individualized class sheets, adapting the procedure, they monitor the class work and encourage the teachers to use contemporary didactic solutions with useful advice and they hold workshops in which they demonstrate how to behave in certain class situations in order to understand the

behaviour of the student better and create a better relationship between the students (Jurić et al., 2001).

Table 2  
*Mann-Whitney test statistics*

	Category	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
v3	teachers	342	204.66	69992.50
	expert associates	40	79.01	3160.50
v4	teachers	345	203.73	70287.00
	expert associates	40	100.45	4018.00
v6	teachers	345	198.98	68649.50
	expert associates	40	141.39	5655.50
v7	teachers	344	196.58	67624.50
	expert associates	40	157.39	6295.50
v8	teachers	341	198.90	67824.00
	expert associates	40	123.68	4947.00
v9	teachers	344	199.32	68567.50
	expert associates	40	133.81	5352.50
v10	teachers	343	200.62	68812.50
	expert associates	40	118.09	4723.50
v12	teachers	342	198.02	67722.00
	expert associates	40	135.78	5431.00
v13	teachers	344	200.50	68972.50
	expert associates	40	123.69	4947.50
v14	teachers	342	201.01	68746.50
	expert associates	40	110.16	4406.50
v17	teachers	342	195.93	67008.00
	expert associates	40	153.63	6145.00
v19	teachers	342	200.99	68738.00
	expert associates	40	110.38	4415.00
v20	teachers	339	193.92	65737.50
	expert associates	40	156.81	6272.50
v21	teachers	342	198.15	67767.50
	expert associates	40	134.64	5385.50
v22	teachers	341	200.27	68291.50
	expert associates	40	111.99	4479.50

With regards to the Mann-Whitney nonparametric test, where the direction of the difference is shown in Table 2, the data in Table 3 indicate that on some values there are differences between the teachers and expert associates in how they perceive the application of the individualized approach of the teacher in working with students with disabilities, which partially confirms the hypothesis that there is a statistically

significant difference between the teachers and expert associates in the assessment on the representation of the didactic and methodological support for the implementation of the individualized approach in class. The differences manifest themselves in the variables which refer to their different perception that for students with disabilities the teacher (V3) focuses on their positive characteristics, their strong points; (V4) during class the teacher is patient, gentle and has more understanding for students with emotional problems; (V6) simple and clear teaching material is applied without too many details (i.e. applications, pictures, drawings, maps, schemes...); (V7) font/tests are adapted (bigger space between words, sentences, lines of text, texts are summarized...); (V8) tasks are stressed, rules and important information is underlined; (V9) texts are shortened, the important content or facts are extracted, the number of facts is decreased; (V10) the texts are simplified according to content, simpler expressions are used; (V12) the teachers plan the lesson separately due to group activities to include students with disabilities; (V13) they check their understanding of what was learned in class; (V17) they apply oral rather than written exams to those students who need it most; (V19) they plan a system of stimulating procedures and activities to strengthen the student's interests, will and desire for school demands and obligations; (V20) they plan the lesson contents according to the students' results of the initial tests; (V21) they plan and organize assistance in class with peers who do not have disabilities; and (V22) they praise the students with disabilities even for the smallest effort that they make.

These results can be interpreted based on long-term work on educational integration of students with disabilities into regular systems, and then on educational inclusion, which in our practice has, for many years, been based on required differential and individualized teaching and provision of appropriate support to students with disabilities. Namely, our schools constantly emphasize that teachers need to implement the necessary differences in setting individual goals or expected achievements, individualization and adaptation of the content and teaching and study methods as well as teaching in accordance with the student's individual abilities and particularities (Ivančić & Stančić, 2013).

The obtained results indicate that the teachers perceive and self-assess themselves relatively high on the scale of specific competences and skills required for individualized teaching of students with disabilities. Therefore, in order to further the self-assessment of the teacher, one should approach this with regard to the testing of the measurability of the planned outcomes, as well as the achievements of the students with disabilities in order to recognize the necessary competences of the teacher to successfully plan and realize the individual procedures and adaptations of methods, tools and forms according to the needs of each student. Today's inclusive classrooms should be positive, supportive environments which have a deep understanding for the social, emotional and physical development of the student, therefore it is important to recognize, cultivate and strengthen the competences of the teacher. Ivančić and Stančić (2013, p. 150) by analysing the conducted research in Croatia state that by

assessing the effects of educating the teacher one can conclude that teachers look at inclusion of students with disabilities in a regular system more positively, they point out less to its negative effects and believe to a greater extent that “a regular school can be entirely prepared for integration”.

Therefore, those teachers who are trained to use various new teaching strategies are better prepared to provide the appropriate support to each student. In accordance with that, understanding and the use of new teaching strategies in class enable the teacher to improve the students' achievements. The results indicate that, in practice, teachers look for new ways in their work and want to realize their role by means of creativity. In accordance to that, we can conclude that the quality and development of the school system and school innovation system derive from the importance of the concept of the expert-development department as the foundation for development, but with a significantly altered context of learning and teaching (Jurić et al., 2001). Regarding this, such results can be explained by the fact that in our education system the necessary preconditions for planning of the curriculum for individualized teaching and working with students with disabilities have been created, as well as constant organizing and directing the teachers to permanent and quality professional training and cooperation with all the participants of the education process and especially expert associates in school (National Framework Curriculum, 2010). According to that, along with important professional, ethical and multicultural characteristics of competent teachers and expert associates, it is their responsibility to meet the needs of all students in school, that is, to create positive attitudes and a positive learning environment when working with students with disabilities, and also to work as a team.

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there were many subjective and objective reasons for neglecting professional training of teachers in the Republic of Croatia, which mostly referred to the opinions that there were not enough funds and/or not enough experts in the system. There was, however, a lot of room for organization and implementation of individual and group training in schools (Staničić, 2006). Along with that, teachers today for the most part professionally strain themselves by reading professional journals, taking part in organised professional conferences and congresses and by using the Internet. The Internet is the easiest way for teachers to stay current with the best practical ideas, activities and directions for implementing new teaching strategies for students with disabilities (Martel, 2009).

Based on the analysis of the existing system of professional training of educators and the assessment of the requirements of the Education and Teacher Training Agency of the Republic of Croatia for their professional training (2013) *Professional Training Strategy for the Professional Development of Educators 2014-2020*, defined that a quality teacher realizes his/her potential environment, recognizes the needs and interests of the students, adapts the teaching, knows, can and wants to do everything in his/her power to realize the student's achievements. It also defines quality teaching as something that should be logical, clear and purposeful, and that takes place in a stimulating

environment and an atmosphere full of respect for different needs of students and, at the same time, it realizes determined goals and positive learning outcomes. Therefore, quality professional training is primarily based on the advancement of knowledge of the contents in question and didactic and methodological knowledge. Because the *Strategy* further stresses that the principals and professional service department should be trained for strategic planning which includes the professional development of educators, these results indicate that with quality cooperation, agreement with and monitoring of the teachers in providing individualized support to students with disabilities, this contributes to the realization of the development of didactic and methodological aspects of the activities of inclusive practice. Therefore, it is of great importance that there is cooperation and support among different interest groups, including the teachers, expert associates as well as the parents (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998; McLeskey, 2007; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Zigmond, 2003; Zigmond, Kloo, & Volonino, 2009).

Table 3  
Mann-Whitney test statistics. Grouping variable

	v1	v2	v3	v4	v5	v6	v7	v8	v9	v10	v11	v12	v13	v14
Mann-Whitney U	6413.0	5775.0	<b>2340.5</b>	<b>3198.0</b>	6532.5	<b>4835.5</b>	<b>5475.5</b>	<b>4127.0</b>	<b>4532.5</b>	<b>3903.5</b>	5926.0	<b>4611.0</b>	<b>4127.5</b>	<b>3586.5</b>
Wilcoxon W	7233.0	6595.0	<b>3160.5</b>	<b>4018.0</b>	7312.5	<b>5655.5</b>	<b>6295.5</b>	<b>4947.0</b>	<b>5352.5</b>	<b>4723.5</b>	6746.0	<b>5431.0</b>	<b>4947.5</b>	<b>4406.5</b>
Z	-.775	-1.790	<b>-7.507</b>	<b>-6.211</b>	-.101	<b>-3.345</b>	<b>-2.219</b>	<b>-4.322</b>	<b>-3.767</b>	<b>-4.724</b>	-1.528	<b>-3.551</b>	<b>-4.525</b>	<b>-5.557</b>
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.438	.073	<b>.000</b>	<b>.000</b>	.919	<b>.001</b>	<b>.026</b>	<b>.000</b>	<b>.000</b>	<b>.000</b>	.127	<b>.000</b>	<b>.000</b>	<b>.000</b>

  

	v15	v16	v17	v18	v19	v20	v21	v22	v23	v24	v25
Mann-Whitney U	6736.00	5936.5	<b>5325.0</b>	5653.5	<b>3595.0</b>	<b>5452.5</b>	<b>4565.5</b>	<b>3659.5</b>	6276.00	6010.5	6568.50
Wilcoxon W	64706.0	6756.5	<b>6145.0</b>	6433.5	<b>4415.0</b>	<b>6272.5</b>	<b>5385.5</b>	<b>4479.5</b>	64929.0	6830.5	65221.5
Z	-.103	-1.776	<b>-2.610</b>	-1.606	<b>-5.278</b>	<b>-2.135</b>	<b>-3.601</b>	<b>-5.622</b>	-.881	-1.289	-.432
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.918	.076	<b>.009</b>	.108	<b>.000</b>	<b>.033</b>	<b>.000</b>	<b>.000</b>	.378	.197	.665

There is no doubt that the needs of students with disabilities, including academic achievements, can be met with an appropriate assessment, careful planning and application of various methods, forms and tools of competent teachers. However, it is necessary to constantly encourage teachers through various support and training programmes to develop specific competences to implement inclusive practice, in the sense that students with disabilities can participate in activities with their peers, as well as to apply new methods within the frame of individualized teaching. Contemporary research in Croatia on the attitudes of teachers on inclusion of students with disabilities in the regular system shows that they are more positive than the attitudes of teachers



from the research conducted in the past (Ivančić & Stančić, 2013). The results of this research on the level of representation of the individualized approach in working with students with disabilities support this. However, because of the partial differences in the perception of teachers and expert associates, the results of this research also indicate the need for team work and cooperation when making decisions on providing individualized support which best meets the needs of students with disabilities. Thus, it is possible to further expect the improvement of local inclusive practice. The results call for further need of education of professionals in our schools on working with students with disabilities. Regarding this, there is an emphasis on ensuring support programmes for students with disabilities by educating professional employees to provide practical help in everyday classroom situations (Bouillet, 2010; Bouillet & Bijedić, 2007). However, the social model of inclusive education does not always produce academic results in achievements of students with disabilities according to their abilities and possibilities, which the professional-developmental department and the principals, and also the parents do expect. Therefore, it is important that teachers use new teaching methods, cooperation and cooperative teaching, relying on the collective experience and knowledge and mutual dealing with and solving problems (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). By implementing contemporary teaching strategies in class, the significant ones are those that support the education for students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms and refer to personal directed planning and peer support. In accordance with this, teachers and expert associates are expected to make team decisions on organizing the class process with regard to the resources available in their school, bearing in mind the level of skills and knowledge of the students they are working with in order to make the appropriate decisions on a less restrictive environment. In that way, teachers and expert associates place students with disabilities in the centre of the class process, rather than their ideological beliefs (Ford, 2013).

## **Conclusions**

The aim of this research was to test the extent to which teachers and expert associates in regular primary schools assess how much and in what form individualized teaching of students with disabilities is represented. The posed hypothesis, that there is statistically a significant difference between teachers and expert associates in the assessment on the representation of the appropriate didactic and methodological support for the implementation of the individualized approach in class, is partially confirmed due to the present statistically significant difference between teachers and expert associates in their perception of the application of the individualized approach of teachers in working with students with disabilities, which is reflected in their perception of adaptation of incentives for students with disabilities in the sense of focusing on their “strong points”, and because of the representation of enough patience, understanding and tenderness in class with students who have emotional problems.

Further differences refer to the level of representation of perceptive adaptation (application of simple, clear resources, adaptation of font of a certain content, stressing

tasks, rules and important content by underlining it) and cognitive adaptation (shortening texts, extracting important parts of the content, using simple expressions while simplifying texts). Differences were also found on the variables referring to planning stimulating procedures and activities for students with disabilities, the content of the teaching regarding the students' results on the initial test as well as planning peer support.

However, it is necessary to emphasize the necessity of caution upon conclusion. Regardless of the fact that each conducted research on this subject from its viewpoint contributes to realizing the development of inclusive practice in our education system and aims to achieve a more complex insight into the quality of our teachers and other professionals who work with students with disabilities, much empirical research needs to be conducted with the goal of systematic collection of relevant knowledge on the way in which both teachers and expert associates work to contribute to improving the educational inclusive practice. Furthermore, it is of the utmost importance to ensure and assess the measurability of the achievements of students with disabilities within the framework of the planned individualized educational programmes (Forlin & Chambers, 2011). Movkebaieva, Oralkanova, and Uaidullakzy (2013) state that the concept of inclusive education, in which the teacher should demonstrate a new way of thinking, is the ability to recognize personal and social significance in the professional implementation of activities for students with disabilities and take on the responsibility for the quality of the achieved results. In that sense, special attention should be paid to the aspects of teacher education (Shaddock, Neill, van Limbeek, & Hoffman-Raap, 2007). On the other hand, developmental pedagogical activities of expert associates are the only recognizable European innovation in the Croatian school system which is perceived as a quality solution for the schools to deal with new cultural, technological and social challenges (Staničić, 2011). In accordance with that, expert associates identify and analyse possible systematic and programme areas that are in need of change, as well as the attitudes in their schools, in order to create a positive environment to include students with disabilities. In cooperation with the staff from other schools, they can help establish school politics that propagate respect, high expectations and interest in the successful results of each student. They can also initiate and encourage the importance of continuous professional training of the teachers in working with students with disabilities.

Whether we are talking about working directly with students with disabilities or in cooperation with the teachers, expert associates can contribute to the quality environment for including students with disabilities in the regular educational system. Finally, by communicating with high expectations and providing support, expert associates can help students with disabilities as well as their teachers and parents to understand that their disabilities should not be a reason to limit their ambitions. Observing experience from around the world and local indicators, training and specialization of specific competences for inclusive educational practice can serve

as the basis for the development of professionals in the area of education as well as further specialization of the teaching profession at teacher's colleges, encouraging team work, cooperation and life-long education.

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# Stav učitelja i stručnih suradnika prema primjeni individualiziranog pristupa u radu s učenicima s teškoćama

## Sažetak

*Nacionalni okvirni kurikulum za predškolski odgoj i obrazovanje te opće obvezno i srednjoškolsko obrazovanje u Republici Hrvatskoj naglašava individualizirani pristup i podršku u skladu s potrebama, interesima i sveukupnim razvojem svakog pojedinog djeteta. To pretpostavlja procjenu, planiranje i primjenu različitih strategija podrške da bi odgojno-obrazovni proces bio učinkovit za svu djecu. S obzirom na to da u svijetu istraživanja o učinkovitosti rada stručnjaka u inkluzivnoj odgojno-obrazovnoj praksi govore o važnosti temeljnih principa i metoda rada (Ford, 2013; Martel, 2009; Obiakor, Harris, Mutua, Rotatori i Algozzine, 2012; Scruggs, Mastropieri i Marshak, 2012), ističe se potreba samoprocjene profesionalaca koji sudjeluju u neposrednom radu s djecom s teškoćama o primjeni individualiziranih metoda, sredstava, oblika i postupaka u nastavi. Stoga je cilj ovoga rada ispitati u kojoj mjeri učitelji i stručni suradnici u redovitim osnovnim školama procjenjuju da je zastupljen, i u kojem obliku, individualizirani pristup učitelja u radu s učenicima s teškoćama. U istraživanju je sudjelovalo 345 učitelja i 40 stručnih suradnika zaposlenih u redovitim osnovnim školama na području Grada Zagreba i Zagrebačke županije. Postavljena je hipoteza da postoji statistički značajna razlika između učitelja i stručnih suradnika u procjeni o zastupljenosti odgovarajuće didaktičko-metodičke podrške za provedbu individualiziranog pristupa na nastavi. Rezultati pokazuju djelomično postojanje razlika između učitelja i stručnih suradnika koje se očituju u njihovom stavu prema zastupljenosti prilagodbe poticaja, perceptivne i spoznajne prilagodbe sadržaja, kao i u planiranju postupaka i aktivnosti za učenike s teškoćama. Takvi rezultati upućuju na potrebu kontinuiranog stručnog usavršavanja za stjecanje specifičnih kompetencija učitelja i stručnih suradnika u radu s učenicima s teškoćama, kao i razvoj i upotrebu novih metodičko-didaktičkih modela podrške u nastavi.*

**Ključne riječi:** didaktičko-metodička podrška; inkluzivna nastava; kompetentni odgojno-obrazovni stručnjaci; nastavne strategije.