



*Original Contribution*

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**SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT - CONDITION FOR PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL WELL-BEING OF SCHOOLCHILDREN WITH MENTAL RETARDATION**

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**ABSTRACT**

The focus of this paper is affixed to the problem of the supportive environment as a condition for personal development of students with mental retardation.

In the construct of inclusive education an important determinant is the environment, which needs to be changed and to suit students with special educational needs in order to become active participants in the educational process.

In the last several years our educational policy outlined strokes of real change for children with special educational needs with their ability to learn, to develop their potential together with their peers in the kindergartens and schools. The thesis for the personal development of students with mental retardation in the process of learning is motivated by the supportive environment that includes not only accessible architectural environment, but also teams for complex pedagogical assessment and support of the educational process, diagnostic, consultative and rehabilitation activities, facilities and assistive technology training, teaching materials, textbooks and preparation of individual educational program in order to be included and become part of the general education environment.

**Key words:** inclusive education, training, students with mental retardation, team and individual program.

**INTRODUCTION**

Democratic changes generate new challenges not only for the society and education, but also for individuals including the one with special educational needs. Under the circumstances of today's globalization as a unique planetary phenomenon in the field of pedagogical science and practice the relevance and actuality of the problem of personal and social well-being of students with mental retardation is nominated. The supportive environment is an important factor for the effectiveness of the educational process in inclusive education, because in the process of inclusion of students with mental retardation in the training, environment must

"fit" to the child and student, not a the child to the environment. (1)

A process of reconsideration of the philosophy and organization of education systems in the country was started over the past several years and the child placing the child in the center of the educational process as the main value. It is the inclusive education which gives equal chance and opportunity for students with mental retardation to learn and play, to be accepted and appreciated. For the school to be inclusive, means to use all available resources to accept and help each child regardless of his/her capabilities or deficits. (2)

This means every child to achieve maximum capacity, to receive equal treatment and expectations for success. Inclusion means

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changing of philosophy of the process of learning and functioning of the school itself. In order to be an inclusive school it is necessary to implement the Index of inclusion because it considers the approach to education and the support for pupils with special educational needs. The goal for the schools is to accept differences in students and strive to meet the needs of each so that they can achieve the maximum of their possibilities. Index for Inclusion is a guide that helps mainstream schools in the process of their development as inclusive schools where everyone feels valued, involved in school life and is given a chance to reveal the maximum capabilities and learn. Index for Inclusion is a resource aimed at inclusion of all children in the learning process and their participation in the games. (3)

The role of the school is to provide environment which meets the needs of students with mental retardation. The process of personality development can be seen as a process of interaction with social as well as educational environment, where every single element of this interaction has its own place and priority. We recognize the fact that the study of the problem takes place in times of existence of multiple theories for personality and its development, interpreted from biological, psychological, social, behavioral and other points of view.

For the theoretical understanding of personal training at school assist the concept of K. Rodgers that defines the personality focused training as meaningful, self-initiated, and aimed at learning as an element of personal experience. The author accepts the personality as self-worth for the education and purpose of the education and the socium. The personality focused training puts students in contact with real life problems, because only then they are motivated to learn and create. The task of personality focused training according to K. Rodgers is to assist individuals to understand themselves, their problems and mobilize internal forces and capabilities for solving them and for self-development. (4)

Training is linked to personal development of pupils with special educational needs and it requires the necessary supportive environment, in order for them to become part of the educational process. This is particularly

important in the subject-subjective interaction in the educational process of students with mental retardation as a prerequisite for inclusion of the different providing environment that allow them to be themselves and develop in a manner and at a pace suitable for them.

The study aims to reveal features of inclusive education, oriented towards personal development of students with mental disabilities included in general education environment.

## DISCUSSION

The supportive environment is an important determinant in the process of learning for students with mental retardation. It should be targeted and individualized towards the students with mental disabilities to ensure their maximum participation in educational process. As the students are not just passive recipients of knowledge, but active participants in the learning process. They explore the environment and construct their knowledge by making connections between the new information and what they already know. In this way, student transform into a full human being, an individual and not just a subject of impact. Learning should not be seen as discovering of something, because there is no objectively existing knowledge that can, almost mechanically, to be passed from teacher to student. Since knowledge is not transmitted, but constructed on the basis of the experience which the child possesses in a process of active interaction with the environment. The environment plays a key role in the learning process. Learning doesn't happen in a vacuum, isolated from the outside world and people. On the contrary, it is inextricably linked to interaction with classmates, friends, teachers, parents, etc. Therefore, one should encourage students to communicate. Thus, class develops as a community and becomes a major prerequisite for effective learning. Along with this, it is necessary for the environment in the classroom to be adequate and to allow students to feel well and be able to express their views freely. The role of the teacher is very responsible, as he/she supports the creation of such an environment (physical and emotional), which facilitates learning. (5)

In this context, supportive environment is important for students with mental retardation, especially:

- accessible architectural environment in the school;
- a team of specialists to assist the educational process - special teachers, resource teachers, psychologists, speech therapists, parents, guardians or custodians of children and students with mental retardation.
- diagnosis, consultation and rehabilitation activities;
- assistive devices and technology, teaching materials, textbooks and other;
- Individual Education Program (6).

The thesis for personal growth of students with mental retardation in the process of learning is justified by the assessment made and the individual education program developed by the team at the Regional Inspectorate of Education and the school.

Supportive environment is of crucial importance for the personal development of students with mental retardation in order to be included in the process of learning and to participate in extracurricular activities, clubs, schools, at the playground, in school life, because this is a valuable resource not only in achieving academic knowledge, but it gives possibilities for their ability development. Main subject of training is the student, who interacts with the training subject - the teacher, and interrelates with all other components - target, content and organization.

In the educational process it is necessary to change the status quo, namely:

- equal access to quality education;
  - child's needs in the center of education;
  - the student from an object to become the subject of the education - developing his/her potential and becoming an active actor;
  - changing the role of the teacher, who from the leader of the educational process becomes a facilitator, supporting and motivating child's development;
  - involvement of parents of mentally retarded children in the educational process.
- Through their involvement they assume their responsibilities and with specific actions they contribute to the development and improvement of the capabilities of their children. Parents of children with mental retardation would be more useful when they receive the necessary support, before the children start attending kindergarten

or school, because they are to choose the model of training for their child. Parents take the decision for the education of their child - training and education in special schools or integrated education in general school, on the bases of a thorough assessment of educational needs of children and students with disabilities made by the teams for complex pedagogical assessment, to identify opportunities for training according to teaching plans and programs suitable for their individual development. (7)

In the context of inclusive education one of the most important emphasis in the training process is respecting the needs and interests of each student included in the general education environment. In a student-oriented class the teacher should know the interests and needs of each student and to plan their activities accordingly.

In the learning process an important prerequisite is the interaction between students in which they from one point of view learn content, but from another master certain skills - to work together in a team, to listen to each other, to respect the opinions of others, etc. An important factor influencing the quality of this interaction is the organization of the physical environment. The environment must be organized so as to facilitate students to communicate and work together in the classroom. The organization of space in the classroom can be changed depending on the purpose of learning and techniques used. (8)

The usage of teaching methods and techniques is another major factor that affects directly the interaction between students in the classroom. Whatever techniques to be used, however, one should not forget that the techniques are not the goal themselves. This means that the use of interactive techniques is not sufficient to define the work in the classroom as child oriented. One and the same technique can be used in different ways and this can lead to different effects, depending on perceptions, attitudes and beliefs of the teacher. In the educational and training processes it is necessary for the techniques to be interpreted and applied in the context of the philosophy and principles of student-oriented approaches.

Legal documents define the support as oriented towards the needs of the students with special educational needs. It is undeniable fact that the

students with disabilities have the need to be provided with a supportive environment. Our observations prove that students with mental retardation face barriers in their education in schools.

## CONCLUSION

On the bases of observations, discussions and interviews of principals, teachers in schools, the following can be stated:

- Teams do not carry out a thorough assessment of the educational needs of the students with disabilities to identify opportunities for training curricula and training programs in accordance with individual development;
- Not all of the teams carry out comprehensive educational assessment according to quantitative and qualitative indicators;
- There is need to implement a multidisciplinary model of work of the teams;
- Teams do not evaluate the needs of children and pupils with special educational needs for facilities and technologies to facilitate their training;
- The interaction between specialists in the team is not corresponding to the required level;
- Design of a system for reporting of the strengths and resources of students with mental retardation by the team;
- The individual educational program is not designed by the whole team, fundamental principles are not respected;
- Tracking the dynamics of development of the students and implementation of the individual educational program is not performed by the team;
- Parents, guardians or custodians are not involved in the evaluation of the child by the team, as well as in the process of designing of individual educational programs. In fact, the parents, guardians are just informed about the results of the evaluation and the individual program by the team of the school, instead of being a part of the team together with the student with mental retardation. (7)

In the context of integration, one of the most important but also one of the most difficult

aspects of change is the acceptance of diversity as an asset and resource, rather than a hindrance and deficit, which requires supportive environment to enable students with mental disabilities in order to become active participants in the educational process.

In conclusion, we will point out that the leading idea of inclusiveness is the environment that should be changed to fit the individual and not vice versa, so that pupils with special educational needs can learn certain values and form their attitude towards the world and people around them, which will lead to their personal development.

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