

## Challenges of student's assistants with children with special needs in primary school

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### **Abstract**

*A student, who is orientated as a child with special needs in primary school, can be assigned a student's assistant based on school legislation. In the continuation the role of student's assistant is presented from the perspective of the student, student's assistant, class teacher and provider of additional professional assistance. We were interested in the student's assistant's work tasks and the areas of work in which she helps the students. We highlighted many challenges that student's assistant faces in her work daily. Qualitative research was carried out with semi-structured interviews for all participants in the research. It has been established that direct work tasks vary greatly depending on the orientations of students with special needs. In the case of a mobility impaired student, the student's assistant mainly provides physical assistance, while in the case of a student with autistic disorders and a student with behavioural and emotional disorders, the student's assistant helps with behavioural guidance, directing attention, constant motivation and social inclusion. Keywords: work tasks, student's assistant, physical assistance, primary school, a student.*

## Izzivi spremljevalcev otrok s posebnimi potrebami v osnovni šoli

### **Povzetek**

*Učencu, ki je v osnovni šoli usmerjen kot otrok s posebnimi potrebami, se lahko na podlagi šolske zakonodaje dodeli spremljevalka. V nadaljevanju je predstavljena vloga spremljevalke iz perspektive učenca, spremljevalke, razrednika in izvajateljice dodatne strokovne pomoči. Zanimale so nas spremljevalkine delovne naloge ter področja dela, na katerih pomaga učencu. Izpostavljeni so številni izzivi s katerimi se spremljevalke dnevno soočajo pri svojem delu. Izvedena je bila kvalitativna raziskava s polstrukturiranimi intervjuji za vse sodelujoče v raziskavi. Ugotovljeno je, da se neposredne delovne naloge zelo razlikuje glede na usmeritve učencev s posebnimi potrebami. Pri gibalno ovirani učenki spremljevalec izvaja predvsem fizično pomoč, pri učencu z avtističnimi motnjami in učencu z vedenjskimi in čustvenimi motnjami pa usmerjanje vedenja, pozornosti, stalnega motiviranja ter pomoč pri socialni vključenosti. Ključne besede: delovne naloge, spremljevalec, fizična pomoč, osnovna šola, učenec*

## INTRODUCTION

The assignment of a student's assistant is primarily based on the Children with Special Needs Guidance Act (2011) and the Regulation on Additional Specialist and Physical Support for Children and Young Adults with Special Needs (2013). Students with severe or very severe mobility impairments and visually impaired students, who are orientated to educational programmes with adapted implementation and additional professional support (onward APS), may be assigned a temporary or permanent student's assistant for the duration of their educational programme. Exceptionally, a temporary student's assistant can be assigned to a chronically ill student, a visually impaired student, a student with impaired visual function, a student with autistic disorders and a student with emotional and behavioural disorders. Exceptions to the assignment of a temporary student's assistant are determined by the minister based on various professional criteria.

Oblak (2019) notes that the work of a student's assistant is important and responsible, it does not only involve physical assistance. She is responsible for more than just accompanying the student from class to class or preparing their school supplies on the desk. He defines her work as complex, which often requires direct educational work. The student's assistant finds herself in the role of consultant, didactic educator, teacher, friend, psychologist, physiotherapist...

Students with special needs are children, who need help and adapted methods of implementation of programmes during their education. The assignment of a student's assistant in primary school is crucial for some students, who find it difficult to integrate into the regular primary school program, as they need help with physical and/or academic and/or social inclusion into the school environment.

The work of student's assistant is divided into temporary and permanent. The job of a permanent student's assistant is systemized by the school and enables regular employment; meanwhile, the work of a temporary student's assistant is not systemized, which makes it more difficult for the school to hire her, however, they can find her among their employees (Zveza za avtizem, 2021). The difference between the work of a permanent and a temporary student's assistant is also in the working time, more specifically her work obligations. The Regulation on Norms and Standards for the Implementation of the Primary School Program (2017, act 14) states that the scope of work obligations and the duration of the employment of the student's assistant depends on the number of students who are provided with physical assistance as well as the number of hours providing assistance. This all depends on the duration of the classes and the afterschool supervising, if the student uses it (Peterlin, 2018). In the case of a temporary student's assistant, working hours and work obligations are also related to financing. Legislation mandates that the tasks of a temporary and permanent student's assistant are written down in an individualized program (onward IP), which are not abided by all schools. This leads to distinctions in the student's assistant execution of work tasks, which can also affect their job satisfaction and motivation.

One of the most important work tasks of a student's assistant is cooperation with all professionals on the team. IP creation itself requires a team approach and cooperation. Oblak (2019) mentions the student's assistant's help with designing, implementation and evaluation of the IP, which is important for the professional team to properly upgrade the IP so it's the most beneficial to the student. Therefore, the suitable qualities of a student's assistant are not only important for the successful cooperation with the student, but also with the professional team. Teachers perceive the presence of the student's assistant in different ways. Some teachers see their presence as surveillance and therefore cannot be relaxed in their teaching. While others use the student's assistant to help them get rid of some of their own burden.

## PURPOSE

In the research, we want to discover the role of the student's assistant working with children in adapted program with APS. This is a regular primary school program that includes students with special educational needs. The focus is going to be on deciding the roles of a student's assistant, her work tasks, cooperation and weaknesses, observed by the participants in the research.

## METHODOLOGY

We used a descriptive method of research and a qualitative research approach. For the purposes of the research, we conducted 4 semi-structured interviews – for each group of participants (students, student's assistants, class teachers and providers of additional professional support). We used individually created questionnaires, which were designed based on theoretical guidelines and direct practical work.

The research sample consisted of 12 people – 3 students of primary school, who have a decree on the guidance of children with special needs (ZUOPP-1, 2011) and a corresponding student's assistant; 3 student's assistants, 3 class teachers and 3 providers of APS.

All participants work and cooperate with students in the school year 2023/24.

Students:

- 6<sup>th</sup> grade, orientated as a student with emotional disorders and mild behavioural disorders, chronically ill child (ADHD),
- 5<sup>th</sup> grade, orientated as a student with severe mobility impairments,
- 5<sup>th</sup> grade, orientated as a student with autistic disorders (autism spectrum disorders).

Student's assistants:

- Graduated tourism organiser; she is accompanying the student for the second school year and this is her first student.
- Graduated visual communication designer; working as a student's assistant for the third school year, this is her first student.
- Graphic operator (completed high school); cooperating with the student for the third year, this is her first student.

Class teachers:

- Completed the 2<sup>nd</sup> level of the bologna system – master's degree, professor of Slovene and comparative literature, sixth year teaching.
- Completed the 2<sup>nd</sup> level of the bologna system – master's degree, professor of English at the primary level; ninth year teaching.
- Professor of primary school; 31st year teaching.

Providers of APS:

- Master's degree in social pedagogy; implements ASP for 5 years.
- Professor of defectology; implements ASP for 17 years.
- Special educational needs teacher; implements ASP for 16 years.

Interviews were conducted in person, lasting 45 minutes. All necessary consents were obtained for the purpose of the research.

## RESULTS

In the research we discovered that all 3 students have in common that they have established a friendly relationship with the student's assistant and that she is always there to help them when they need her. It is important that the student's assistant is always the same person. Mobility impaired student emphasizes the physical help, which is also the most important for her, because without it, she cannot participate equally in school. The student highlights that she feels safe because of her (for example in sports) as she helps her not to get injured. The student's assistant also provides physical assistance with writing, gluing, feeding, going to the toilet, hygiene (showing, brushing teeth in schools in nature), dressing and undressing.

All student's assistants obtained their job even without pedagogue degree. No education of any kind was required nor offered to them by the school. They do not attend lectures about special needs students in their free time, as they receive information in other forms (personal conversations, meetings...). Two of the student's assistants emphasized that being a mother helped them in their work. They also highlighted reading professional materials, for example on autism, and the conversations with student's mother, who herself often attends lectures. All student's assistants emphasized that recognising the needs of their students and implementing them is their most important task. Other work tasks include giving the students the ability to retrieve (take time for themselves), solving peer disputes and conversations with a student, distinguishing between good and bad, how they could have acted differently, etc. When talking about resolving peer disputes the answers of student's assistants differ. One of them highlights that they are not alone since other professionals are also involved, for example provider of APS, class teacher. Other mostly mentions her role in resolving the dispute and informing other, including the student's parents. All student's assistants stressed the role of attending meetings with parents and other professionals. When it comes to mobility impaired students, student's assistant often cooperates with student's therapist (most often physiotherapist). The difference between the work of the student's assistants is found on the area of delivering information to parents. One of the student's assistant was asked for her telephone number during the interview for the job and communicates frequently with student's parents. She informs them about the tests and convey information, if there is something specific that needs to be brought to school. Whenever something particular happens, she writes or even calls them, when a quick response is needed. The other two student's assistants do not communicate with the parents through their personal phone number. One of them specifically emphasized the fact that her work tasks in the school are the ones that concern a certain child. Therefore, she cannot specify her work tasks since her tasks are not precisely determined and differ from day to day depending on the needs of the student. Regarding the defects of their job, the student's assistants stated that this is a job where you are underappreciated and underpaid. They would have also liked more knowledge about the special needs of a student and a paying bonus for work that carries a lot of responsibilities.

All 3 class teachers emphasized that an important task of the student's assistant is knowing the students and their needs. Therefore, they believe that the student's assistant should be a permanent person, who is regularly employed at the school. Two class teachers mainly mention the work tasks that enable the student to retreat, directing attention to make it easier for the student to follow the lesson, and pointing out inappropriate behaviour that allows an uninterrupted teaching, and less time spent on discipline. As an advantage to working with a student's assistant they also express the fact that the student's assistant can be a source of information about the student, a help to others and an important factor for an »easier execution" of lessons with a smaller number of students, if the pedagogical activity is suited for it. All 3 class teachers think that there are no flaws in the work of a

student's assistant. However, in the continuation of the interview, it was perceived that the weaknesses in most cases don't relate directly to cooperation with the student's assistant, but to the perspective of help. They pointed out the lack of knowledge about the student's basic needs and the difficulty of finding the right boundary of what the student could or couldn't do on his own.

Providers of additional professional support (APS) mainly emphasized the help of the student's assistant in educational field mostly mentioning directing the student's attention. They also believe that student's assistants provide a lot of help on behavioural and emotional areas of the student. In their opinion, the role of the student's assistant is important also on socially-connecting area of the student and concern for their safety with moving and mobility. Additionally, they highlighted the significant role of the student's assistant on educational level, especially encouragement, motivation, help with arts and encouraging educational independency. All providers of APS mentioned delimitation of working tasks on educational field, since teaching and testing knowledge is not a job of the student's assistant. On the social area, they highlighted positive as well as negative influence of the student's assistant on the student. It is important the example student's assistant sets, that she encourages independence of the students and uses suitable strategies for integrating the students in the classroom. As an advantage of cooperation between providers of APS and student's assistant they stated conveying information about the student on time, solving conflicts when they occur and facilitation of the work for the providers of APS as they don't have to do all their work themselves. As a disadvantage of cooperation, they pointed out the fact that the work of student's assistant is still stigmatized too much and not well known by other professionals. They think that students as well as teachers need get used to the student's assistant, which can lead to initial discomfort at first. It is necessary to balance the amount of help provided by the student's assistant, so that it doesn't reduce student's independence. Here it's important to correctly execute the work tasks of the student's assistant.

## **DISCUSSION**

The obtained results consist of different perspectives on the work of student's assistant in the program with adapted execution and APS. Perspectives of the student, student's assistant, class teacher and provider of APS were presented. Most frequently mentioned role of the student's assistant was that of accompanying the student. She accompanies the student in the school environment during lessons, breaks as well as other day activities while being in schools in nature. The student's assistant also provides a haven, safe space, help and support whenever the child needs it. She is a pillar for a student to lean on and it was also emphasized many times that it is better for the student if the student's assistant doesn't change.

The APS providers, who are responsible for writing the IP, pointed out that student's assistants don't know enough about the work that awaits them. It is important that they get used to their work gradually. Normally when they begin their job, they neither know the student nor have the knowledge about his special needs or their work tasks. They believe that they accumulate knowledge and skills day to day, mostly from their colleagues (teachers, other student's assistants, parents).

Interviewed student's assistants highlight their personal virtues and skills. For them it's important to have a joy for children and a positive personality that encourages students to be as independent as possible and the knowledge on how to adjust the scope and type of help and support needed. They also think that it's difficult to delimit all work tasks and at the same time fulfil the wishes and expectations of students, colleagues and parents. Rutar (2020) also emphasizes, that it's necessary to delimit the help from student's assistant from the student's real needs. It is important that the

student's assistant encourages the active role of the student and at the same time motivates him. An interpersonal relationship based on mutual respect is significant between the student and student's assistant.

Not all work tasks of student's assistant can be listed in the IP as they are constantly changing. Therefore, we highlight the conclusion that not all work tasks can be written down in advance. It is important to communicate with the student's assistant, who has to be motivated to perform the work entrusted to her. If the student's assistant is too intimidated; or feels disconnected to the student; or if she doesn't have adequate support from her fellow professionals; than no matter what is written on the IP, she won't be able to do her job well. The reality is also explained by Keršič (2020), who lists the desirable qualities of the student's assistant, such as professionalism, spiritual, physical and social maturity, humanity, respect, empathy, trustworthiness, life optimism, ability to observe, responsibility, ingenuity, adaptability. The problem is that these ideals are difficult to acquire in real life as well as in direct pedagogue practice, however, it's important to come near them. It is also necessary for student's assistants to admit that they don't know everything and that they are satisfied with what they do. The student's assistant with her presence influences the social, emotional and behavioural areas, independency, safety and mobility. Regarding the educational area, it was repeatedly pointed out that this shouldn't be an area on which the student's assistant would have crucial influence. The student's assistant has already an impact on the student's academic success and well-being with motivating the student, directing his attention, encouraging him and pointing out inappropriate behaviour. In the interviews with all class teachers, it turned out that they were not disturbed by the presence of the student's assistant during their teaching. Everyone emphasized that they are aware of the limits of the work of a student's assistant and no one wants to burden her too much. They are looking out for what will benefit the student and when possibility occurs for the student to retreat and execute an activity outside the class in a smaller group.

The student's assistants figure out the solutions themselves, however, if the problem that they cannot resolve occurs, they seek help from other professional colleagues, who teach that student. Our findings confirm the statements from Oblak (2019), who describes the role of student's assistant as poorly equipped, as it has flaws or even non-existent description of her work tasks. Therefore, the student's assistant often relies on the vision of directing staff and other professionals. Three schools participated in our research and even with them, we could notice the difference in the performance of the directing staff and distinct cooperation and ways of executing the work of the student's assistant.

## **CONCLUSION**

The research concludes that the role of the student's assistant in her work tasks differ greatly depending on the orientation of the student; that the employer doesn't require any specific knowledge of the student's needs, that the student's assistants mostly derive from their own experiences and from the help and support of fellow professionals who teach that child, the child's parents and literature. The student's assistant is involved in many areas in which she helps the student. Considering that the primary school education consists of behavioural and academic education, the student's assistant role is linked to both, however, to what extent she intervenes in which area, varies on the needs of each individual student. The tasks of student's assistant vary greatly depending on the orientation of the student's special needs. The tasks depend on the directing staff, how they set up the student's assistant work in their school; from the determining student's assistant tasks in the IP and how the student's assistant herself sees her role; to student's assistant education and personal characteristics.

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