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## ***The Sense of Belonging in School from the Perspective of Students with Developmental Difficulties<sup>2</sup>***

### **Extended summary**

The sense of belonging is most often described in the literature as a degree to which an individual feels included, respected, accepted and supported by others in different social contexts. The sense of belonging is becoming a significant aspect of the concept of inclusion that has been particularly promoted in the USA and in the United Kingdom. The success of inclusive education, measured by the sense of belonging to the school, has recently become the subject of numerous foreign researches, while a modest number of papers can be found in the domestic literature. The research related to our country mostly referred to the attitude-value orientations of educators, parents and pupils towards children with developmental difficulties, physical and material readiness for inclusion and the competencies of teachers for inclusive education. The reason for the smaller number of research papers on the feelings of children with disabilities lies in the great heterogeneity related to the type and degree of disability, as well as in the frequent difficulties with verbal and written expression of children with developmental difficulties.

Starting from the fact that children with developmental difficulties know and feel the best the problems they encounter in an inclusive educational environment, the aim of the research is to examine the level of satisfaction of pupils with disabilities through the sense of be-

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longing to a school. The aim of the research was operationalized through research tasks that were related to the analysis of the feeling of belonging to the school in relation to the type of developmental disability, school age and gender.

The sample consisted of thirty-five children with developmental difficulties from eleven primary schools on the territory of the Republic of Serbia. The selection criteria were that the children attend classes according to a special training program (Individual curriculum, IEP 1), that they did not change school, ie. to be in an inclusive school from the very beginning of schooling and to have inclusive education applied for at least eight years. In relation to the type of disability, the largest number of children had intellectual disabilities (31.4%), followed by physical and sensory disabilities (28.6%), unspecified developmental disorders from the autism spectrum (20%) and behavioral disorders (20.0%). The study used the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale - PSSM (Goodenow, 1993), adapted for the research of children with developmental disabilities by a group of authors (Frederickson et al., 2007). The adapted scale contains twelve statements with the possibility of answers from 1 to 3, where a higher score on the scale indicates a stronger sense of belonging to the school. Descriptive measures (arithmetic mean, standard deviation, frequencies and percentages) and analytical statistics ( $\chi^2$  test, one-factor ANOVA and t-test) were used in the processing of the results.

The results of the research show that the majority of pupils have a high level of sense of belonging to the school, which indicates a positive experience of pupils during their schooling in the institutions where the research was conducted. In relation to the type of disability, the results showed that pupils with physical and sensory disabilities feel happy and accepted and love school, unlike their peers with behavioral disorders, who achieved the lowest results on the school affiliation scale. The results of the ANOVA test showed that there is no statistically significant difference in pupils' answers, which can be explained by the limitation in the number of respondents, as well as the existence of pronounced individual differences among children. No differences were found in the sense of belonging to the school between pupils of younger and older school age, but gender differences were found in favor of boys, which can be related to personal factors, as well as factors related to school and family.

While staying in a group of peers, children with developmental difficulties had the opportunity to observe, imitate, and interact with children without these difficulties and thus gain a sense of security and belonging to the group. The lower level of experience of school affiliation of students with behavioral disorders indicates the need for their contacts with peers and adults in the school to be encouraged and guided, structured, and rewarded by teachers. The teachers, above all, should help the pupils to improve problem-solving skills in the social environment, increase motivation for prosocial behavior, and discourage the manifestation of negative forms of behavior. Peer interaction is a significant and irreplaceable factor of socialization because it contributes to the development of a stable identity and taking over the social and affective perspective of another. Successful interaction between pupils requires constructive relationships that are most easily achieved in education by means of group activities with a common goal, such as cooperative learning. Pupils without developmental difficulties should be encouraged and supported in accepting a new role related to peer co-education, support, and assistance in jointly resolving conflict situations.

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Since this is a vulnerable group of children, a qualitative analysis that would look at the impact of various factors, primarily relationships with peers and teachers, pupil involvement in school and extracurricular activities, parental and teacher support, would provide more accurate data on school adherence of pupils with developmental difficulties and, according to that, it would be necessary to take adequate measures aimed at promoting inclusive policies and practices.

**Keywords:** sense of belonging in school, pupils with developmental difficulties, types of developmental difficulties, inclusive school, inclusion

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