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Original research paper

Social Status of Students with Developmental Difficulties in the Classroom from the Perspective of the Vocational School Teachers[2]

Extended summary

Peer acceptance is one of the important needs and sources of children's well-being while they are growing up. Many theoretical considerations and empirical research in the field of social relations among peers point to the significance of social acceptance in terms of an overall personality development. Given the specificities of their growing up period, children with developmental difficulties often face problems in social functioning, establishing interactions, and positioning in their peer group. Despite the efforts to provide these students with better conditions for education and development in regular schools, and consequently to encourage and improve their social acceptance and participation, research in our country and globally consistently confirms that students with developmental difficulties are accepted to a lesser degree in the class and that they face rejection and neglect significantly more often than their peers. Research confirms that teachers themselves claim that the acceptance of students with developmental difficulties is at a significantly lower level, compared to the social competence and acceptance of other students in the class. In our country, there have been a few studies investigating the social status of students with developmental difficulties from the perspective of teachers, and only few studies dealt with the perceptions of the secondary vocational school teachers about the positioning of these students in the peer group. Bearing in mind that teach-

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ers have a crucial impact on the establishment and maintenance of quality relationships and interactions of students with developmental difficulties and their peers, and that research in this area on the older age groups of students is rare, examining their perceptions can provide a deeper insight into the social functioning of these students at high school age and help to understand better their social positioning in the peer group. Therefore, the aim of the research was to investigate the opinions of the vocational school teachers about the social status of students with developmental disabilities in the class. Our intention was to get an insight into the teachers' perceptions of the social status of these students in the class, as well as their opinions about the factors that influence it. The participants were fifty (84% female teachers) teachers from 7 vocational schools in Serbia (Belgrade, Aleksinac, and Prokuplje) who teach different school subjects, from different fields of work (economics, law and administration, mechanical engineering and metalworking, electrical engineering, traffic, textiles and leather, health and social care, agriculture, food production and processing, chemistry, non-metals, graphic arts, and personal services). The researchers used a questionnaire with open-ended questions, in which teachers were asked to describe the social status of the students with developmental difficulties in the class and list the key factors that influenced that status. The qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis was used in the data processing, the goal of which was to analyze the experience of the research participants with some phenomenon from their personal perspective. Apart from the description of the obtained statements of the respondents, the interpretive phenomenological analysis also included the researcher's interpretation of the respondents' personal experiences. The main findings of the research indicate that the social status of students with developmental difficulties is less favourable than the social status of other students in the class. Teachers' answers indicate that students with developmental difficulties and their peers are not adequately prepared to function and learn together in regular secondary school classes. Namely, students with developmental difficulties generally lack previous experience in interactions with other people, self-confidence, motivation, and the necessary social skills that would enable them to have successful interactions with their peers, while other students are not prepared during schooling to establish close and equal relationships with these students, which imply mutual acceptance, appreciation, and provision of the necessary support. The respondents point out that the social status of students with developmental difficulties is significantly influenced by the following factors: teachers, peers, individual characteristics of students and family environment, school, and society. Teachers are particularly aware of the importance of their own role in improving the social position of students with developmental difficulties, but they believe that they need the continuous support of all important stakeholders in the educational process. It can be concluded that it is necessary to pay more attention to the preparation of teachers for the implementation of inclusive education and the application of a differentiated approach in teaching and extracurricular activities, to raising the general level of competence, self-confidence, and motivation of students with developmental difficulties, improving the social skills of other students in the class, as well as to the implementation of the program for strengthening parental capacities. In this way, in the mutual interaction of various factors, conditions would be created for better social functioning of students who have developmental difficulties in the peer group. In further research, it would be useful to examine in more detail the teachers' perceptions of the social position of students with de-

velopmental difficulties in vocational school classes, by using semi-structured interviews or focus groups, which would provide additional information and deeper insights into their experience in practice when it comes to social functioning of these students and their peers in regular high school classes.

Keywords: inclusive education, social acceptance, peer interaction, social skills, teachers' attitudes

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