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## INCLUSIVE EDUCATION - SOCIAL DISTANCE OF REGULAR SCHOOL STUDENTS TOWARDS STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

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**Abstract:** Inclusive education implies an approach that is in the function of students, their developmental and educational needs, regardless of differences in individual characteristics, abilities and opportunities. The basic concept of inclusive education primarily refers to the detection of barriers and difficulties during the education of all children, with the aim of creating conditions for the education of each child in accordance with his individual characteristics and capabilities. Negative attitudes of peers are mentioned as one of the hindering factors of successful educational inclusion of children who need additional support in education. Therefore, the aim of the research was to examine the social distance of students of the typical elementary school age population towards their peers with speech and language disorders and other developmental disabilities in the regular education system, in relation to the age, gender of the student and degree of closeness. The sample consisted of 482 respondents (students of primary school age). The research was carried out in primary schools in Serbia. The Bogardus Social Distance Scale specially adapted for this research was used to collect data. It consisted of twelve questions, with dichotomous answers. Out of the total number of questions, five questions implied a necessarily close relationship, while seven questions in the scale did not imply that. The only difference was in the first question, where it was emphasized whether it was a student with a speech and language disorder or another developmental disorder. In cooperation with teachers, class teachers and professional associates of schools, surveys and written consents for parents were distributed to students. The criterion for students' participation in the research was a signed consent form from their parents. The results showed that there is a statistically significant difference in the social distance of students with regular development towards students with speech and language disorders and students with other developmental disabilities, where the social distance towards students with speech and language disorders is less pronounced. The results show that the age of students does not affect the degree of social distance towards peers, while differences were found in relation to gender. It was found that male respondents express a higher degree of social distance compared to their peers with speech impediments and other developmental disabilities. It is concluded that further improvement of inclusive educational work is needed, in the direction of devising adequate approaches in everyday pedagogical practice with the aim of developing the ability of students of typical development to accept diversity and thus creating conditions not only for the successful implementation of the inclusive process, but also for improving the quality of life of children with speech and language disorders and other developmental disorders.

**Keywords:** social distance, inclusive education, quality of life.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education includes a series of measures and procedures aimed at improving an inclusive society as a whole and implies the inclusion of students with developmental disabilities in the regular education system, and a set of pedagogical conditions by which every child, whether average, gifted or with reduced abilities, has a chance to progress in accordance with their capabilities (Pritula, Kudek Milošević & Šarčević Ivić - Hofman, 2023; Ristić & Kovačević, 2022). Therefore, inclusive education represents a strategy oriented towards all students and teachers. The success of inclusive education is to a large extent conditioned by the activities in the daily pedagogical work in the classes, and not only by adapting curricula, content, forms of work and applied methods (Ristić, 2019). Activities in daily teaching practice do not mean creating optimal conditions for overcoming all obstacles that only students with disabilities have in the learning process, but overcoming obstacles that all students have, but also in other aspects of the school context. According to Glavinić and Ristić (2023), the strategy of inclusive education is basically holistically oriented, and focusing on the overall development of students contributes to the acquisition of certain social competencies, such as acceptance of diversity (Glavinić & Ristić, 2023). The results of the research also indicate the positive effects of inclusive education in relation to students with developmental disabilities, both in the area of academic achievements and in communication and interaction with peers and the development of a sense of belonging to a group (Carter & Hughes 2005; Frederickson et al, 2007; Kurth & Mastergeorge 2010; Radovanović & Kovačević 2021; Ristić & Kovačević, 2022). On the other hand, the fact that the inclusion of

children with developmental disabilities in regular schools did not lead to an increase in contact with peers and the number of friendships made, but that they are less accepted compared to students with typical development, who often do not perceive them as members of their class, confirm the results of a large number of studies (Le Mare & De la Ronde, 2000; Soresi & Nota, 2000). There is a certain level of social distance between students of the general population and students with disabilities, that is, unwillingness to engage in direct, reciprocal social interactions with peers with disabilities. All this reflects not only on the cognitive aspect of the functioning of students with developmental disabilities, but also on their overall well-being, because as a consequence of the lack of experience in interacting with peers of the typical population, there is a feeling of insecurity, incompetence, low self-esteem, withdrawal and isolation (Firat & Koyuncu, 2022).

## 2. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Starting from the fact that the strategy of inclusive education is aimed at removing or reducing obstacles in the learning process and the overall development of the child, overcoming prejudices and accepting diversity, during which the performance and support of the peer group is necessary, the aim of the research is to determine the social distance of students of the typical elementary school age population according to peers with speech and language disorders and other developmental disabilities in an inclusive regular school in relation to the age, gender of the student and degree of closeness achieved.

Based on the formulated goals and objectives, the starting hypothesis of this research is defined as the assumption that there is a pronounced social distance of peers towards students with developmental disabilities and a less pronounced social distance towards students with speech and language disorders, speech-language problems in relation to age and gender and degree of closeness. The sample consisted of four hundred and eighty-two students attending inclusive regular schools in the territory of the Republic of Serbia.

The structure of the sample in relation to age consisted of 13.1% of first graders, 8.1% of second graders, 9.5% of third graders, 16% of fourth graders, 5.4% of fifth graders, 7.9% of sixth graders, 17, 2% of seventh and 22.8% of eighth grade students (Table 1). In relation to age, the sample was divided into two groups consisting of younger (1st - 4th grade) and older school age (5th - 8th grade) students. The structure of the sample in relation to younger and older school age consisted of 46.7% of younger school age students and 53.3% of older school age students. The gender structure of the sample consisted of 50.6% boys and 49.6% girls.

The research was conducted in inclusive primary schools on the territory of the Republic of Serbia in the second semester of the 2022/2023 school year. Students with typical development who attend inclusive primary schools were examined in compliance with all procedures that comply with ethical requirements. The Bogardus social distance scale, adapted for the needs of this research, was used for data collection. It consists of twelve questions, with dichotomous yes/no answers. Five questions implied a necessarily close relationship, while seven questions in the scale did not necessarily imply a close relationship. The only difference was in the first question, where it was emphasized whether it was a student with speech and language disorders or a student with another developmental disorder.

In order to test the set hypotheses, descriptive statistics, t-test for comparing results by groups and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) were conducted. Reliability analysis was conducted for both instruments, type of internal consistency ( $\alpha$ ). The results indicate that the reliability of both instruments is acceptable, with the fact that the questionnaire for measuring social distance towards students with speech and language disorders is estimated to be more reliable ( $\alpha=.75$ ) than the questionnaire for measuring social distance towards students with other developmental disabilities ( $\alpha=.67$ ).

## 3. RESEARCH RESULTS

Initially, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to test for differences in social distance among students in grades one through eight. However, as no statistically significant differences were obtained, probably due to small sub-samples at the level of individual classes, the class variable was transformed into two categories of an almost similar number of students - 222 students of junior school age (from first to fourth grade) and 257 students of senior school age (from fifth to eighth grade). Then a t-test was conducted, the results of which indicated that there are statistically significant differences in social distances between students with other developmental disabilities ( $F=6.64$ ,  $t=-2.52(477)$ ,  $p<.05$ ) and students with disabilities speech and language ( $F=.08$ ,  $t=2.30(472)$ ,  $p<.05$ ) in older and younger students (Table 2). Social distance towards students with other developmental disabilities is more pronounced among students of older school age ( $AS=17.26$ ), and social distance towards students with speech and language disabilities is more pronounced among students of younger school age ( $AS=15.97$ ) (Table 3). There is a greater difference in the expression of social distance towards students with other developmental disabilities than towards students with speech and language disabilities.

Table 2 Results of the t-test

Total social distance		Levene's test		t-test						
		F	p	t	df	p	ΔAS	ΔSE	95% confidence interval	
									lower	upper
Other developmental disabilities	Equal variances	6.64	.01	-	477	.01	-.63	.25	-1.12	-.14
	Unequal variances			-	476.58	.01	-.63	.24	-1.12	-.14
Speech and language disorders	Equal variances	.08	.76	2.30	472	.02	.47	.20	.07	.88
	Unequal variances			2.30	455.21	.02	.47	.20	.07	.88

Table 3 Social distance in relation to younger and older age

Total social distance	Age	N	AS	SD	AS SE
Other developmental disabilities	younger	222	16.62	2.47	.16
	older	257	17.26	2.95	.18
Speech and language disorders	younger	219	15.97	2.29	.15
	older	255	15.49	2.20	.13

The results in Table 4 show that there is a difference in the social distance of a higher degree of closeness towards students with other developmental disabilities and it is more pronounced in older students (AS=7.75), as well as a difference in the social distance of a lower degree of closeness towards students with speech disorders. language, which is expressed more among students of younger school age (AS=9.08).

Table 4 Social distance of lower and higher degrees of closeness

Social distance	Age	N	AS	SD	AS SE
Speech and language disorders	younger	222	6.88	1.35	.09
	older	256	6.74	1.41	.08
A high degree of closeness					
Other developmental disabilities	younger	223	7.28	1.47	.09
	older	257	7.75	1.60	.10
A high degree of closeness					
Speech and language disorders	younger	222	9.08	1.38	.09
	older	256	8.75	1.16	.07
A low degree of closeness					
Other developmental disabilities	younger	224	9.33	1.46	.09
	older	257	9.50	1.73	.10
A low degree of closeness					

The results of the t-test indicate that there is a statistically significant difference in the total social distance towards students with speech and language disorders ( $p < .01$ ), as well as towards students with other developmental disorders ( $p < .01$ ) among students of different genders (Table 5). Compared to girls, boys have a statistically significantly higher social distance towards students with speech disorders, as well as a higher social distance towards students with other developmental disabilities (Table 6). Those differences are greater in terms of social distance towards students with other developmental disabilities than towards students with speech and language disabilities.

Table 5 Results of the t-test

Social distance		Levene's test		t-test						
		F	p	t	df	p	ΔAS	ΔSE	95% confidence interval	
									lower	upper
Other developmental disabilities	Equal variances	1.90	.16	3.14	477	.00	.78	.24	.29	1.27
	Unequal variances			3.15	476.98	.00	.78	.24	.29	1.27
Speech and language disorders	Equal variances	1.27	.26	2.56	472	.01	.52	.20	.12	.93
	Unequal variances			2.56	471.64	.01	.52	.20	.12	.93

Table 6 Social distance in relation to gender

Social distance	Gender	AS	SD	AS SE
Other developmental disabilities	Male	17.35	2.79	.17
	Female	16.56	2.67	.17
Speech and language disorders	Male	15.97	2.31	.14
	Female	15.44	2.17	.14

The results shown in Table 7 show that compared to girls, boys show a significantly more pronounced social distance towards students with speech and language disorders, as well as a more pronounced social distance towards students with other other developmental disabilities. Male respondents have a more pronounced social distance, both in a smaller and a greater degree of closeness, both towards students with speech and language disorders and towards students with other developmental disabilities.

Table 7 Social distances of lower and higher degrees of closeness in relation to gender

	Gender	AS	SD	AS SE
Speech and language disorders A high degree of closeness	Male	243	6.93	1.40
	Female	235	6.68	1.36
Other developmental disabilities A high degree of closeness	Male	244	7.72	1.55
	Female	236	7.34	1.54
Speech and language disorders A low degree of closeness	Male	242	9.04	1.32
	Female	236	8.76	1.21
Other developmental disabilities A low degree of closeness	Male	244	9.62	1.65
	Female	237	9.21	1.55

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The first research problem of this research was related to determining the difference in the expression of social distance in relation to the age of the students. Originally, it was planned to determine the differences in social distances among students from the first to the eighth grade. However, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed no statistically significant differences, possibly due to small subsamples at the individual grade level. Therefore, the class variable was transformed into two categories of a similar number of students: younger school age (from first to fourth grade) and older school age (from fifth to eighth grade). After that, a t-test was carried out, the results of which showed that there are statistically significant differences in social distances towards students with other developmental disabilities and towards students with speech disabilities in both younger and older students, with the social distance to students with other developmental disabilities is more pronounced among older students, and social distance towards students with speech and language disorders is more pronounced among students of younger school age. The results showed that there is a greater difference in the expression of social distance towards students with other developmental disabilities than towards students with speech and language disabilities. In the review of the literature, there are no research papers that had the same research design, but in similar studies that dealt with the topic of social distance, the variables, type of developmental disabilities, self-esteem, knowing a person with a certain type of developmental disabilities were examined, and it was confirmed that there are differences in expressed social distances (de Laat, Freriksen & Vervloed, 2013; Werner, Peretz & Roth, 2015).

On the other hand, research that examined the variable gender and age of students and differences in social distance are in line with the findings of this research (Radovanović & Kovačević, 2020). The obtained results of this research can be explained by the fact that empathy is more pronounced at a younger age, so students have a desire to help their peers with developmental disabilities because they perceive them as people who need help. Unlike younger students, older students have more experience and knowledge about both types of disabilities, so they perceive their peers with speech and language disabilities as different from themselves to a lesser extent, while this relationship changes with age (Borjanić Bolić & Ristić, 2022). Furthermore, the results of the research showed that there is a difference in the social distance of a higher degree of closeness towards students with developmental disabilities and that it is more pronounced among students of older school age, while the social distance of a lower degree of closeness is expressed among students of younger school age. These results can be explained by the fact that older students do not want to have any close relationships with students with developmental disorders, they want to sit in a desk with someone else they choose, they want to hang out with people similar to themselves, to invite people similar to themselves on their birthday, to share a room on an excursion with others similar to them, and as for a boy or a girl, this is where their value systems, which they begin to build during puberty, come to the fore. In contrast to them, students of a younger age have a less pronounced problem of sharing a school desk or a room on an excursion with any other friend, of making friends or inviting all friends to a birthday party, including those who have some form of disability. Also, the results of the research established the existence of gender differences in social distance towards students with speech and language disorders and other developmental disabilities, with boys showing a more pronounced social distance. Gender differences were also found in both cases, with social distance being more pronounced in boys.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

The basic requirement and necessary condition of inclusive education is the acceptance of diversity. The results of the research showed that both younger and older students are not ready to enter into direct relationships with peers who have speech and language disorders and other developmental disabilities. This is somewhat worrying, due to the fact that a large number of students with speech and language disorders do not require any special support from teachers and peers, and students nevertheless showed a pronounced social distance towards them, especially boys of younger school age. Considering that inclusive education has already included children with developmental disabilities in the regular education system for the past decade, it would be expected that the results of the examination of the readiness of regular school students to enter into direct relationships with children with developmental disabilities would be different from the results that were showed this, but also similar research. Therefore, it is necessary for the school to work with all actors of the educational process on the basis of evaluation and self-evaluation to find ways to encourage prosocial development of students, peer interaction and cooperation, mutual acceptance and appreciation (Le Mare & De la Ronde, 2000; Ristić, Pavković, Milošević-Vasiljković, 2019; Ristić, Popović & Milovanović 2021). In addition, the teacher should create a teaching environment and by encouraging the development of problem-solving skills and by strengthening the motivation for prosocial behavior, reduce the manifestation of negative attitudes and forms of behavior. As a significant factor in creating a positive school climate, the active role of the family, i.e. the cooperation between the family and the school, stands out (Kurt

& Mastergeorge, 2010). Therefore, on the way to taking measures in the direction of improving inclusive practice, it is necessary to look at the impact of a large number of factors, from supporting families of children with developmental disabilities, peer relationships and interactions, improving teacher competencies, and all with the ultimate goal of improving the quality of life of students with developmental disabilities (Bramston, Bruggerman & Pretty, 2002; Ristić & Čolić, 2023). The realized research is a guide for new research designs that can deal with the issue of social distance towards children with developmental disabilities from other aspects, but also a useful guideline for introducing changes and novelties in everyday inclusive teaching practice.

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