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CHALLENGES FACED BY INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN PRIMARY SCHOOL

Abstract

The paper examines the opinions and views of primary school teachers about inclusive education and the challenges it faces in the school. The paper examines teachers' opinions and views (conducted research in August 2022) from primary school Jovan Mikic in Subotica Republic of Serbia and the opinions of the teachers from primary school Dimitar Vlahov in Shtip, Republic of North Macedonia. In addition to the teachers' opinions, the paper also includes the opinions and views of professionals: pedagogues, psychologists in the mentioned schools. The inclusion of children with special needs in regular groups in primary schools requires the fulfillment of appropriate conditions so that we could talk about inclusion in the true sense of the word. It is necessary to provide adequate material and technical resources, it is necessary to have qualified staff for the work in an inclusive classroom. The paper aims to see the challenges that inclusive education faces in these institutions and to see the positive practices that can be transferred.

Key words: *Inclusive schools, Children with SEN*

1. Introduction

Inclusion is a process that has been discussed more and more in recent years. In addition to discussing this process, it is simultaneously trying to improve the inclusive situation in all segments of social life. When we talk about improvement in all segments, we mean from the earliest age, from the organized inclusion of children in the system of preschool upbringing and education, whereby conditions are created for the successful inclusion of children with special educational needs in regular groups in kindergartens, and this continues as well. in the higher levels of education (primary, secondary, higher) and of course the goal is not retention only within the educational framework but the success of inclusion in the overall social action (successful inclusion among peers outside of school, successful inclusion in the workplace...).

The literature shows that worldwide a serious step has been taken to successfully include children with special needs in society, but it is more than clear that it is not a simple, easy and short procedure at all.

At what pace we will move in the process of implementing inclusion largely depends on where we, our society, are at the moment, what financial, material, personnel resources we have, because they are undoubtedly very important factors that determine the degree of inclusion of children with special needs in regular groups. It is necessary to ensure at the very beginning appropriate conditions for quality inclusive education, it is necessary to provide adequate qualified staff who will work in the inclusive classroom, it is necessary to equip schools with personnel from all professional profiles and that in sufficient numbers (according to the size of the school): pedagogues, psychologists, speech therapists,

special education teachers, social workers, medical personnel... It is necessary to provide adequate material and technical conditions for work in the inclusive classroom, adequate assistive technology, adequate infrastructure (of the school, classrooms and all rooms) that will respond to the needs of all children. Then, no less important, is to create a favorable climate in the classroom and school of acceptance of diversity and mutual help (acceptance of inclusion by children with typical development, parents of children with typical development).

2. Primary Schools and Inclusion

In Macedonia, primary education has a duration of 9 years, while in Serbia it is 8 years, Subject teaching in Serbia in primary schools lasts from the fifth to the eighth grade, while in Macedonia from the fifth to the ninth grade. And the entry age of children in the first grade differs between the two countries. In Macedonia, in the first grade of the primary school, the parent is obliged to enroll the child who will be six years old by the end of the calendar year (Primary Education Law, consolidated text). In Serbia, every child who is at least six and a half and at most seven and a half years old by the beginning of the school year is enrolled in the first grade of elementary school (Закон о основном образовању и васпитању).

„Inclusive education must be viewed as part of a larger goal: to contribute to the creation of a fairer and less discriminatory society for all marginalized citizens by providing education. It is not just a technical or organizational change, but it involves cultural and philosophical changes in approach, based on a commitment to respecting every child and understanding the obligation adjustments of the educational system provided and were in accordance with the child's needs and rights. Therefore, legislation in all sectors should provide measures and services that support development and processes aimed at inclusive education“ (Lansdon, 2014).

According to the Primary Education law in Macedonia, The parent has the right to enroll the child with special educational needs in a primary school, except in cases where the child's special educational needs are such that he/she should attend classes in a special primary school (Primary Education Law, consolidated text). According to the primary education law in Serbia, every person has the right to free and quality basic education and upbringing public school. (Закон о основном образовању и васпитању) In Serbia, a student with developmental disabilities and disabilities, receives basic education and upbringing (as a rule) at school together with other students, and when it is in the best interest of the student at a school for students with developmental disabilities and disabilities, in accordance with the Law (Закон о основном образовању и васпитању).

In both countries, Serbia and Macedonia, in recent years a lot has been written, researched and worked on in the field of inclusion, but as we said, it is not a simple and quick process. What we think is important is during the implementation of a given process, during the change of a specific situation, to occasionally see the experiences of the participants, in this case the teachers, in order to know in which direction we are moving and where we need to we act to truly achieve what we strive for.

The goal of UNICEF is to respect the rights of boys and girls to quality inclusive education. By 2025, all children learn and develop their competencies through quality inclusive education that contributes to their well-being and encourages their active participation in the community. UNICEF will work to ensure that by 2025 in Serbia, teachers acquire the necessary skills and practice to apply modern pedagogical approaches of quality inclusive education and that they have support through effective public policies, monitoring and evaluation (UNICEF Srbija, Kvalitetno i inkluzivno osnovno i srednje obrazovanje). UNICEF is supporting the Ministry of Education and Science of Macedonia to establish national standards for educational outcomes, which are essential for reforming educational programs. The Republic of North Macedonia is a signatory to key international documents concerning focuses on the concept of educational inclusion (Бошковска и др., 2018).

3. Methodology

The Challenges faced by inclusive education in primary school were researched by examining the attitudes of primary school teachers and professional associates in two primary schools in Macedonia and Serbia.

For the purposes of the research, two questionnaires were prepared, one for the primary school teachers and one for the professional associates in the primary schools in Shtip and Subotica. The following participated in the research: 17 primary school teachers and 1 expert associate from PS Jovan

Mikić in Subotica, 20 primary school teachers and 4 expert associates from PS Dimitar Vlahov in Shtip. Both anonymous polls were conducted in August 2022

The questionnaire that we distributed to the primary school teachers (1st to 4th /5th grade) was conducted anonymously and online. The questionnaire consisted of questions grouped into 3 groups, as follows: the first group of questions referred to general data of the teachers, the second group of questions referred to the competencies of the teachers for working with children with special educational needs and the third group referred to teachers' cooperation with the parents of the children.

Most of the questions in the questionnaire were of closed type, for some of the questions the teachers could choose more than one possible answer, for some only one. By conducting this survey, we wanted to see the experiences of teachers in working with children with special educational needs, and at the same time to see their suggestions in which fields should be worked to improve the present situation. At the same time, by conducting the same questionnaire among primary school teachers in two different schools in two different countries, we aimed to collect the positive practices that both have and to share them with each other, and to see the difficulties encountered by the teachers and professional associates, and to show in which directions we need action to improve the situation.

We also supported the research with the opinions and views of the professional associates in the two schools from the two countries. An anonymous online survey questionnaire was delivered to them through which we saw how they think about inclusion and where actions should be taken to improve it.

4. Results and discussion

The survey of the opinions and attitudes of the primary school teachers was divided into the following three groups: general data of the teachers, teachers' competencies, cooperation with parents.

4.1 General data

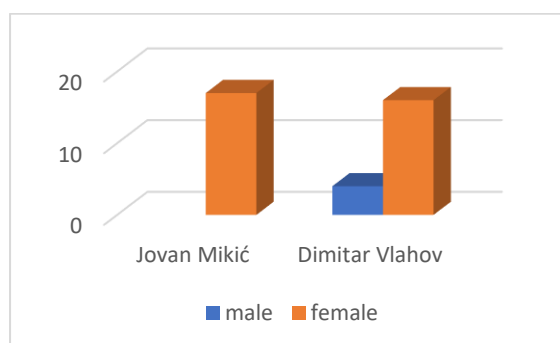


Chart 1. Gender

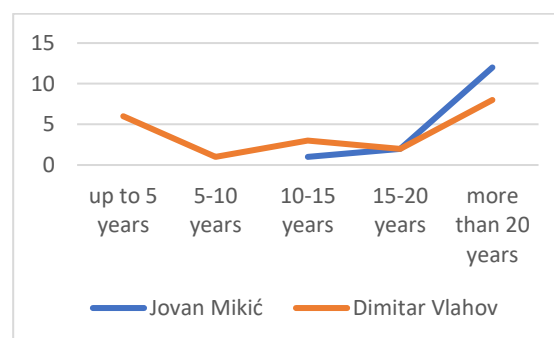


Chart 2. Work experience in primary school

The conducted survey covered an approximate number of teachers from both schools (Chart 1): 17 teachers (who teach from 1st up to 4th grade) from the "Jovan Mikić" school in Serbia, all female, and 20 teachers (who teach from 1st up to 5th grade) from „Dimitar Vlahov“ School in Macedonia, of which 4 (20%) are male and 16 (80%) are female.

The staff involved in the two elementary schools clearly differ in terms of work experience (Chart 2): in Primary School "Jovan Mikić" the least represented teachers are with 10-15 years of work experience in primary school, and the most numerous are teachers with experience of over 20 years (12 in number, ie 70%). The school has no novice teachers and young staff with less than 10 years of experience in education. In Primary School „Dimitar Vlahov“ in general, the staff is with shorter work experience: 30% of the teachers have an experience of up to 5 years, 30% have an experience of more than 5 and less than 20 years, and 40% have an experience of more than 20 years. These differences may have an impact on the results in terms of acquired knowledge, experiences and attitudes of teachers.

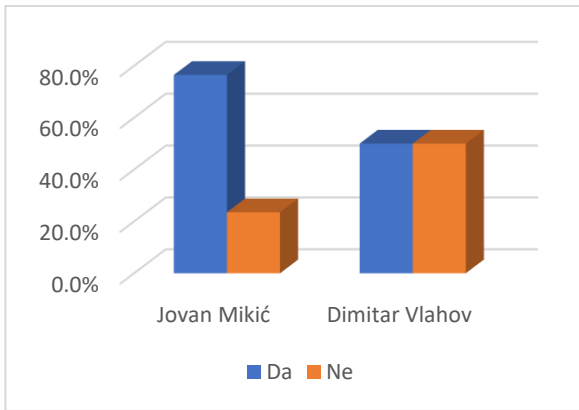


Chart 3. Previous work experience with children with special educational needs

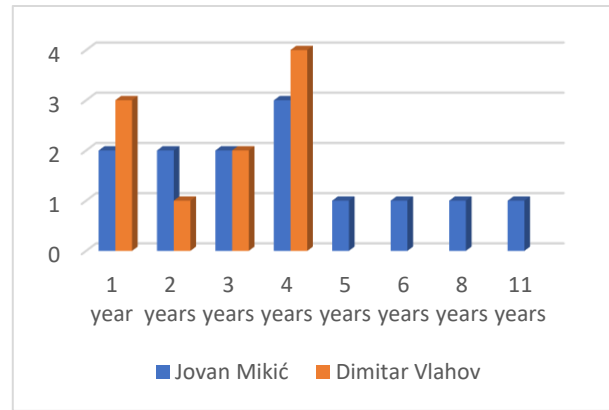


Chart 4. If you have worked with children with special educational needs up to now, list your years of work experience with them

Their experience in working with children with special needs corresponds to the work experience of the teachers (Chart 3). In the "Jovan Mikic" school, 76.5% of the teachers have worked with children with special needs, while only half of the teachers in the "Dimitar Vlahov" school have met these students in their work.

From the surveyed teachers who have worked with students with special needs (Chart 4), in the school "Jovan Mikic" there are teachers with experience with these students for more than five years, although most of the teachers have experience from 1 to 4 years working with students with special needs. In contrast, in Primary School "Dimitar Vlahov" there are no teachers at all who have worked with students with special needs for 5 years or longer, but 40% of the teachers who have worked with these children have been doing so for 4 years. We can connect these differences with previous data on the structure of teachers in terms of their work experience in education.

4.2 Teachers' competencies

We perceived the teachers' competencies in relation to knowledge about inclusion through the knowledge acquired during their university studies and the knowledge about inclusion acquired during the work engagement of teachers.

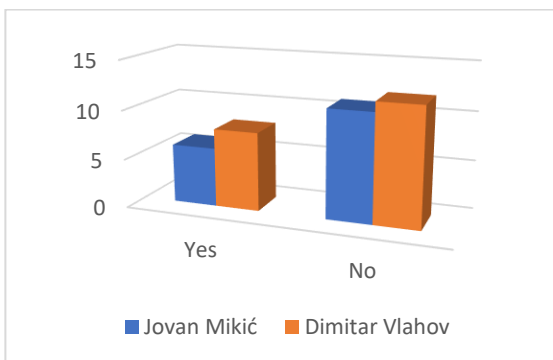


Chart 5. Knowledge about inclusion and work with children with special educational needs acquired during university education

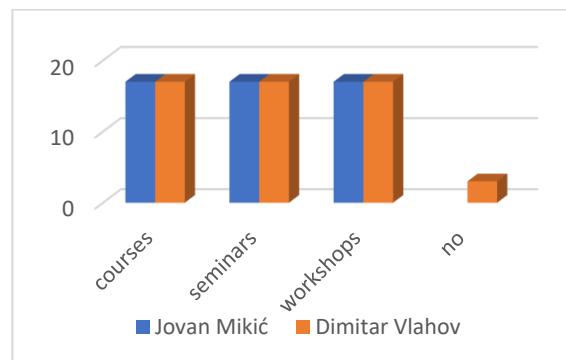


Chart 6. Knowledge about inclusion and working with children with special educational needs acquired during work engagement

Most of the teachers from both schools (Jovan Mikic 11 teachers, Dimitar Vlahov 12 teachers) point out that they did not receive knowledge about inclusion and work with children with special needs during their university education. (Chart 5). Of the teachers who pointed out that they have gained knowledge in this area, part of the teachers obtained it at postgraduate studies and seminars and courses, or within one teaching subject (developmental psychology).

Regarding the preparation for work with students with special needs during work experience (Chart 6), approximate answers were obtained in both schools with the difference that in the school in Serbia

all the participants answered that they attended courses, seminars and workshops during their work experience, while in the school in Macedonia, 3 teachers (15% of the respondents) answered that they did not attend courses, seminars and workshops on this topic.

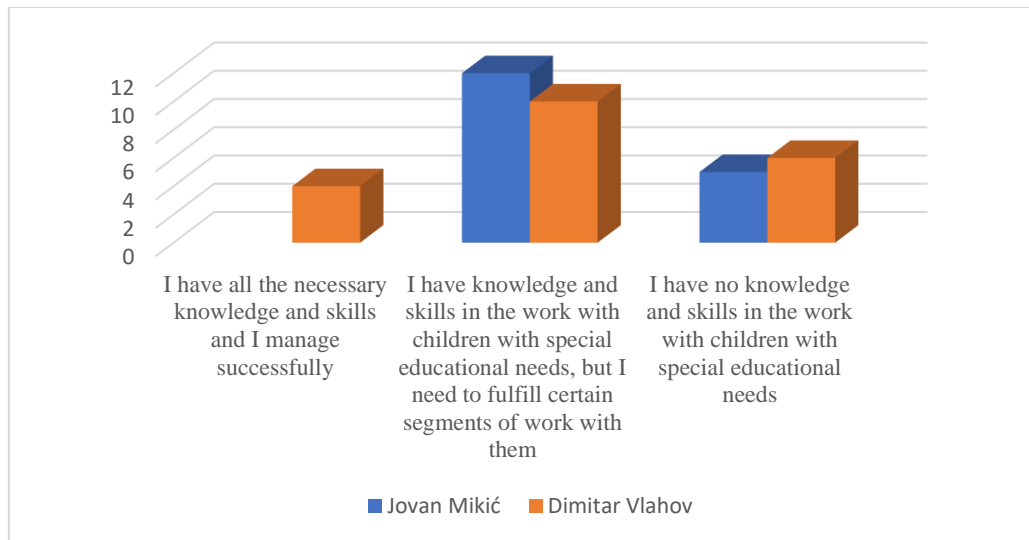


Chart 7. *How do you evaluate your knowledge in the field of working with children with special educational needs?*

In terms of acquired competences for working with students with special needs, most of the teachers from both schools declared that they have knowledge and skills, but they need certain additions (70% of the teachers in primary school "Jovan Mikić" and 50% of the teachers in primary school "Dimitar Vlahov"). The difference in the two schools is the data that some teachers 24% of the school in Serbia feel fully prepared and competent to work with students with special needs and successfully accomplish the same process, while among teachers from Macedonia, not a single teacher is recognized at this level of competence. In view of this difference, we wonder if it results from the differences in the work experience of the staff that were mentioned, or in the different degree of preparation and education available for the teaching staff in this area. The percentage of teachers in both schools who consider that they do not have the knowledge and skills to work with children with special needs is not to be neglected (29% of teachers in primary school "Jovan Mikić" Subotica and 45% of teachers in primary school "Dimitar Vlahov" Shtip) (Chart 7).

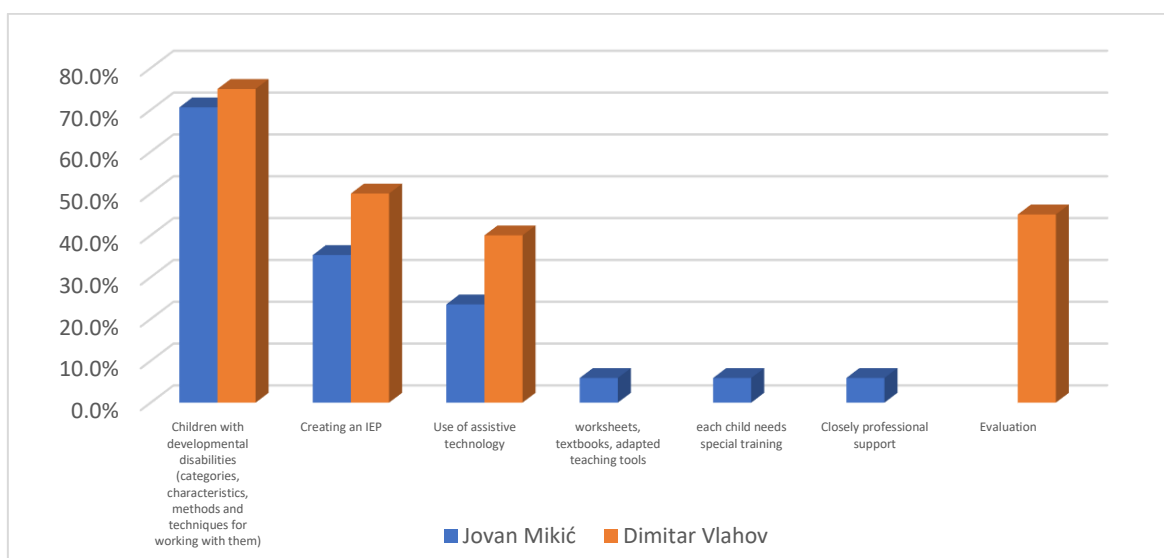


Chart 8. *When it comes to inclusion, in which segments do you need additional refinements?*

In terms of the necessary improvements, the largest percentage of teachers declared that they needed upgrades in terms of general knowledge of the characteristics of students with special needs, the different

categories of needs, and the methods and techniques for working with them (70% of teachers in PS "Jovan Micic" Subotica and 75% of the teachers in PS "Dimitar Vlahov" Shtip). A significant percentage of teachers in both schools (35% of teachers in PS "Jovan Micic" Subotica and 50% of teachers in PS "Dimitar Vlahov" Shtip) need additional training for the preparation of an individual educational plan, and there are small differences in the need for training in the use of assistive technology (23.5% of teachers in OU "Jovan Micic" and 40% of teachers in OU "Dimitar Vlahov"). As many as 45% of the teachers from the "Dimitar Vlahov" school in Shtip need training in terms of evaluating children with special educational needs. There is the operation according to the IOP, but then also the system arrangement of the whole process and its passage through the system (Chart 8).

4.3 Cooperation with parents

Family involvement is important throughout the life cycle of children with disabilities, especially in the early years. A positive relationship between parents and schools affects children's behavior and educational success (Мересман,2014, p.8).

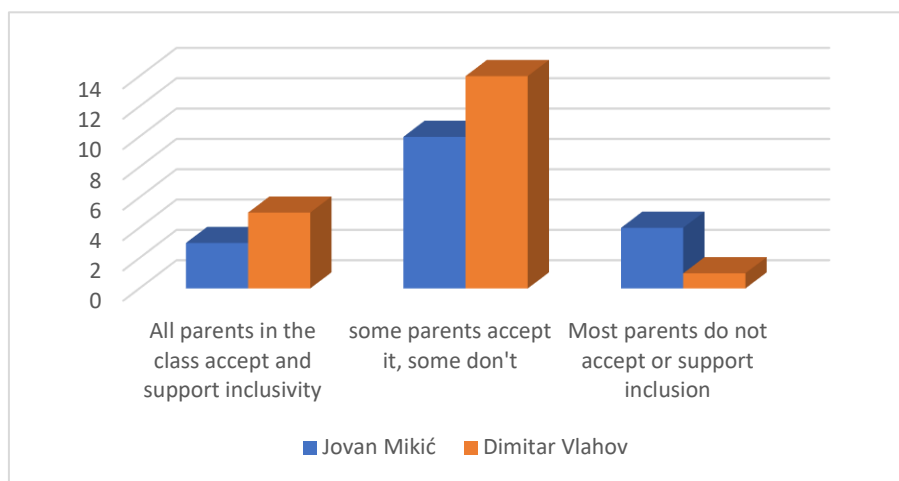


Chart 9. Acceptance and support of inclusion by parents

Experiences with parents in both schools are more positive than negative, indicating that parents are generally open to inclusive processes in schools. 17% of PS "Jovan Micic" and 25% of teachers from PS "Dimitar Vlahov" declared that parents fully accept and support inclusiveness. 59% of teachers from PS "Jovan Micic" and 70% of teachers at PS "Dimitar Vlahov" believe that some parents accept inclusiveness. A smaller percentage of teachers believe that parents do not accept and support inclusion at all (Chart 9).

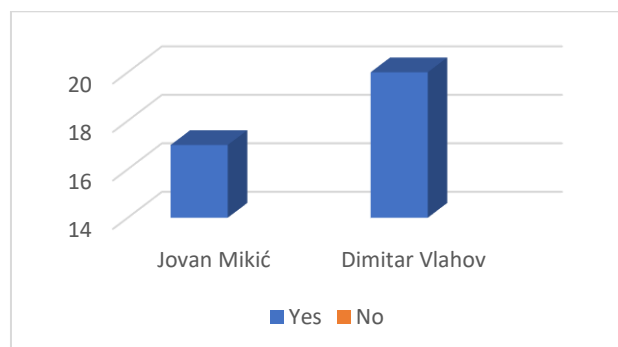


Chart 10. Parents of children with typical development need support in understanding the process of inclusion

In the context of experiences from cooperation with parents (Chart 10), all teachers in both schools agree that parents of students with typical development would benefit from training and support in understanding the inclusion process.

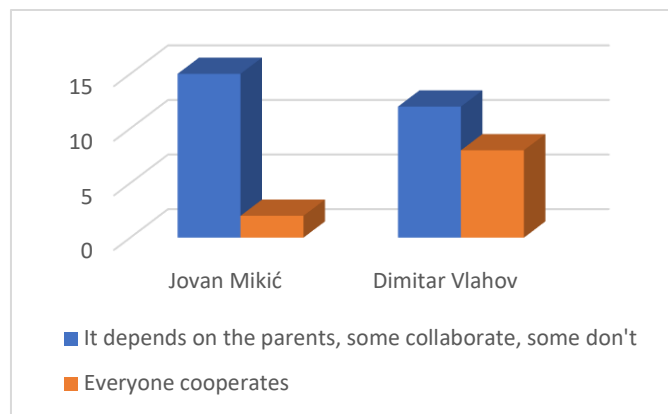


Chart 11. Cooperation with parents

Regarding cooperation with parents (Chart 11), there are slight differences in the experiences at the two schools. In the "Jovan Mikić" school, 88% of the teachers declared that there is cooperation only with some of the parents of children with special needs, 12% that there is cooperation with all the parents of children with special needs with whom they worked. In PS "Dimitar Vlahov" 60% of the teachers stated that there is cooperation only with some of the parents of children with special needs, and 40% that there is cooperation with all the parents of children with special needs with whom they worked. It is positive, however, that in both schools the teachers had no experience with a complete refusal of cooperation in terms of working with students with special needs.

4.4 Opinions and attitudes of professional associates in schools

Professional associates who are employed at OU Jovan Mikić are: pedagogue and psychologist. While in primary school Dimitar Vlahov, professional associates who are employed are: pedagogue, psychologist, special education teacher and social worker. All the professional associates from Dimitar Vlahov Primary School answered the anonymous questionnaire prepared for them, and only the psychologist from PS Jovan Mikić answered. In order to maintain anonymity, and also because the answers of the professional staff from both schools are in the same direction, the presentation of the results will be shared by both schools together.

The professional staff engaged in the schools have different work experience (Chart 12), from professional associates with up to 5 years of work experience in elementary school, to professional associates with more than 20 years of work experience.

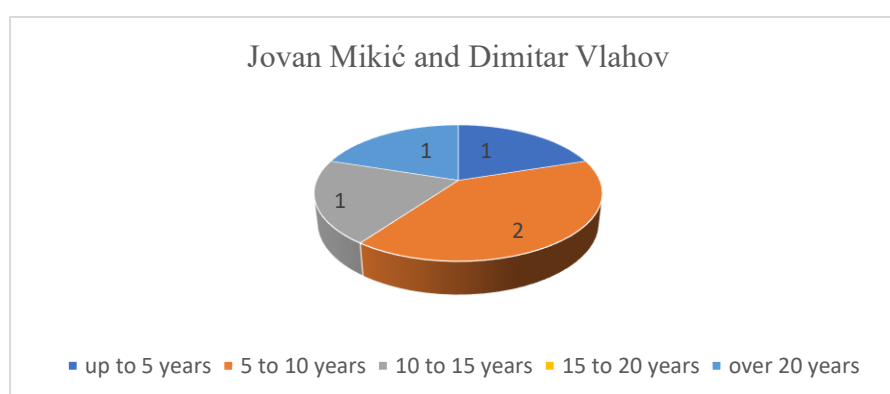


Chart 12. Work experience in primary school

All expert collaborators unanimously agree (Chart 13) that lately (by grade) the number of students with special educational needs has been higher than before. We can make an assumption here that one of the reasons for the increase of children with special needs included in regular classes is due to inclusion, because in the past these children were mainly placed in special classes and special schools.

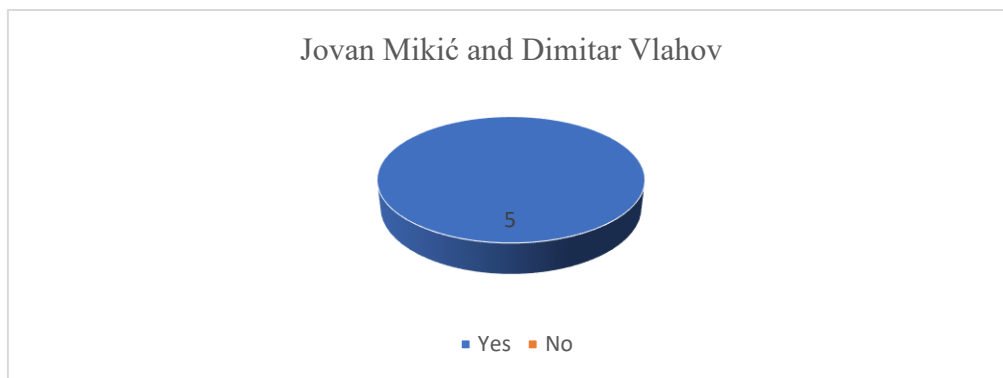


Chart 13. *Has the number of students with special educational needs included (by classes) been higher lately than before?*

Professional associates were asked in which segments they felt the need to strengthen certain situations in the school. Most of the professional collaborators (4) emphasize the need for material-technical re-equipment, as well as personnel-professional upgrading in the area of inclusion, while fewer of the collaborators also emphasize the need for personnel strengthening/staffing.

When it comes to personnel strengthening, it is necessary to analyze not only the profile of professional associates that the school has, but also the capacity of the school in relation to the number of professional associates, because the greater number of children in the school requires hiring not only one expert in the specific profile, but there is a real need to hire several experts in the same profile. Of course, it should not be discussed here that all the profiles of professional associates are needed in a given school.

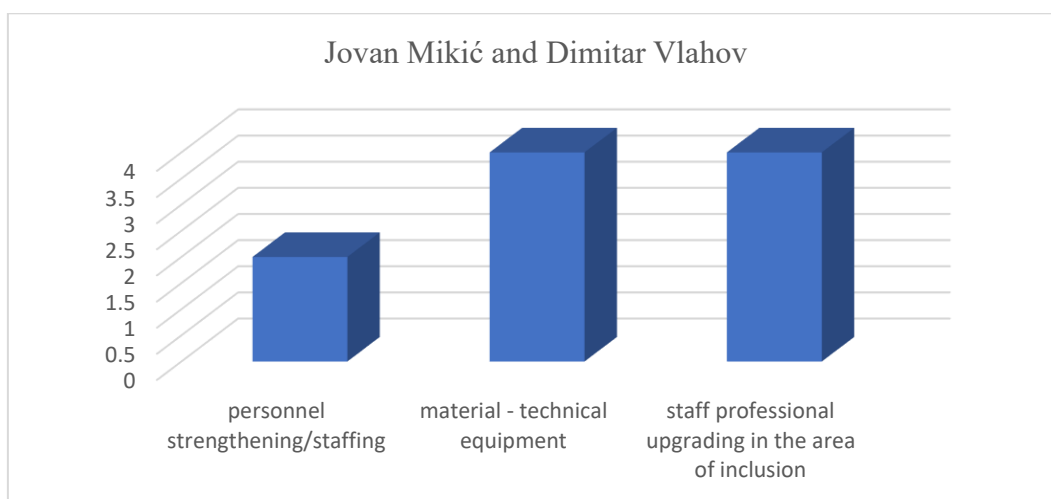


Chart 14. *In which segments is it necessary to strengthen the current situation in the school?*

5. Conclusion

The university education of the teachers who are engaged in primary school teaching has not adequately prepare them for work in an inclusive classroom. The knowledge that a small part of the teachers received about inclusion during their college education is mainly within one teaching subject. This situation requires staff professional upgrading in the area of inclusion, which is emphasized by the professional associates in the schools, but also by the class teachers themselves, while highlighting the segments in which they need additional improvement (children with developmental disabilities, IEP, use of assistive technology). During the work engagement, most of the teachers were active in the field of their own upgrading in the area of inclusion by visiting seminars, courses, workshops, but almost all teachers feel the need for upgrading themselves in the area of work with children with special educational needs.

Cooperation with parents is a very important link in establishing successful inclusion, with all teachers unanimously agreeing that parents of children with typical development need support in understanding the process of inclusion, and here they act. It will help and facilitate the inclusive process in schools significantly. It is more than clear that it is not a simple process, the professional collaborators themselves agree that material and technical re-equipment of schools is also necessary in terms of inclusion, and in this part we need great commitment and action in order to create basic conditions so that we can talk about a real inclusion.

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