Individual education plan as an agent of inclusiveness of the educational system in Serbia: Different perspectives, achievements and new dilemmas

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This paper consolidates data gathered through four recently conducted research studies on inclusive education in Serbia, all of them based on multiple-perspective design and mixed method approach. The main purpose is to explore achievements and unresolved contradictions in the implementation of individual education plan as a critical tool in the schooling of students who need additional support. The results suggest that the introduction of individual education plans has produced multiple contradictions between “old habits” of schools and teachers and new tasks required by inclusive educational policy. Different attempts to resolve these contradictions are evident in the school practice, changing the use of individual education plans, the understanding of inclusive education of all involved actors and at the same time transforming the everyday education practice. Findings are discussed in the light of activity theory.

Keywords: inclusive education, individual educational plan, activity theory, multiple-perspective design

Inclusive education (IE) is a comprehensive, school-wide effort that encourages teachers to aim at high outcomes for all students and to ensure flexible groupings in the development of appropriate curricula (Villa & Thousand, 2000). The meaning of inclusion is culturally determined and essentially depends on the political values and processes of the state for its enactment (Ainscow & César, 2006; Engelbrecht, 2006). IE must be translated into manageable working practices that enable successful learning outcomes to be achieved (Rose, Shevlin, Winter, O’Raw, & Zhao, 2012). The individual education plan (IEP) is regarded as a useful working practice in this context.
Inclusive education and individual education plan

Initially developed for special education purposes in the mid 70s (Rodger, 1995), IEP has increasingly migrated to regular schools and became adopted as a means of ensuring that a focus is maintained upon the specific learning needs, interests, and aspirations of individual pupils described as having special educational needs (Hebel & Persitz, 2014; Meijer, 2003; Rose et al., 2012). In addition, IEP has been promoted as a tool for enabling teachers to make adaptations to lesson planning and the curriculum in order to take account of the needs of individuals and to ensure that they gain access to learning alongside their peers (Loreman, Deppeler, & Harvey, 2010). This is a shift away from a medical approach, focusing on the child’s deficiencies to a position where the teacher becomes responsible for planning and teaching in such ways as to overcome barriers that children may be experiencing in access to learning (Ainscow & César, 2006).

Inclusive education and individual education plan in Serbia

In Serbia, as in many other countries, the use of individual education planning is a key measure introduced with the aim to make IE possible and legitimate (Kovač Cerović, Pavlović Babić, Jokić, Jovanović, & Jovanović, 2016). This is legislated through the Law on the Foundations of the Education System (2009) and a Rulebook on detailed guidelines for determining the right to the individual education plan and its implementation and evaluation (2010). According to these acts, the IEP is a document written in simple language, understandable to all concerned, that conveys the strategies and interventions used to enable children with additional support needs (ASN) to make progress towards individually set goals. It should be developed and periodically reviewed by a team established for each child needing IEP, where the participation of parents is required.

Therefore, the IEP can be seen both as a product and a process (Lee-Tarver, 2006; Rodger, 1995). As a product, the IEP is a roadmap for teachers and parents to plan educational activities, monitor and evaluate the child's progress. It describes the child's present level of performance, short and long term goals and objectives, additional services and support and provides criteria for determining the child's progress. As process, the IEP means collaboration and continuous negotiation between teachers, school councilors and parents in developing, implementing and revising the educational plan in order to best serve the child (Kaye & Aserlind, 1979). Mitchell et al. noted that “IEPs suffer from having multiple purposes ascribed to them, the same IEP document frequently being expected to serve educational, legal, planning, accountability, placement, and resource allocation purposes” (Mitchell, Morton, & Hornby, 2010). In this article we will argue that exactly this multiplicity qualifies IEP as an agent of inclusiveness and renders a thorough exploration of its’ multiple roles a challenging task.

Research findings on individual education plan

Overview of the national and international research findings on IEP indicate that different educational systems struggle with similar issues: to develop compliant and meaningful IEPs, ensure parents’ participation, meet workload and paperwork requirements (Blackwell & Rossetti, 2014; Huefner, 2000; Jovanović, 2013; Smith, 1990; Whitworth, 1994). For example, research on the dynamics of IEP meetings produce consistent findings that educators and administrators exert considerable control over the direction of IEP meetings and content, while families are frequently passive participants (Blackwell & Rossetti, 2014; Garriott, Wandry, & Snyder, 2000) and therefore easily become estranged from the IEP process (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997). Moreover, an overview of multiple studies (Blackwell & Rossetti, 2014) reported findings that raised concerns regarding IEP content, including the quality of IEP goals and objectives and the extent to which the goals facilitated access to the general education curriculum. Insufficient time and excessive paperwork are also recurring themes in studies of IEPs worldwide (Hirsh, 2013, 2014; Smith, 1990). It seems that these logistic challenges can prevent teachers from seeing the positive sides of the IEP and from seeing that the IEP is part of practice rather than something that goes on alongside regular practice. For example, Mitchell et al. (2010) report that IEPs are seen by teachers as an administrative task rather than a tool for planning effective instruction and learning.

Study rationale and aims

We aim at exploring the IEP in the context of the Serbian education system. Specifically, we will be interested in how are teachers and schools positioning themselves vis-a-vis the new tool, the IEP, what challenges are emerging when trying to integrate the IEP into their practice and how are they overcame. Also, we will explore the multiple voices of diverse participants involved in the development and implementation of IE. We will look at IEPs and analyze them in two different settings – in regular schools practicing inclusive education and in special schools and classes that cater only ASN students. Finally, we will look also at IEP from the perspective of the Support network for IE in Serbia, whose role is to support development of IE at school, local and national level.

The purpose of the current study is to shed additional light on IEP as a critical tool in the schooling of ASN students in the Serbian educational context. We expect that the exploration of IEP as a tool will help delineate possible zones of proximal development as working hypotheses for the future and identify areas of IEP and IE where further support is needed. Such exploration has also the potential to generate useful recommendations for different contexts considering to introduce/improve similar measures.
Method

Data sources and research methods

This study draws on data gathered through four recent research studies in Serbia, combining, reanalyzing and reinterpreting them to respond to the questions posed in this article:

1. Monitoring Inclusive Education in Serbia (hereinafter: MIE study). This study, conducted in 2014/2015, represents the first comprehensive monitoring of IE in regular primary schools (RS) in Serbia. It is based on a monitoring framework that combines indicators at national, municipal and school level, covering a broad array of critical features of IE and uses psychometrically tested short instruments for several types of respondents for each indicator (Kovač Cerović et al., 2016; Pavlović Babić, Jovanović, & Jovanović, 2014). One of the indicators is focusing on development and implementation of IEPs. It was assessed by schools (school associates or principals) and parents of ASN students (2 scales, 8 items per scale). The sample of schools was selected through combining quota and stratified sample in accordance with the characteristics of municipalities in which the schools are located.

2. Education in Special Schools and Special Classes study (hereinafter: SE study) was conducted in 2015. Quantitative part of the study included 78% of all special schools and regular schools with special classes in Serbia. The schools for qualitative part of the study were selected based on regional dispersion and school size and used classroom observations, focus groups and interviews with multiple stakeholders and analysis of school records, IEPs and lesson plans collected in the observed schools.

3. Inclusive Education in Serbia: Policies, Practice, and Recommendations (hereinafter: IES study). The study was conducted in 2015 and aimed to provide a comprehensive evaluation of the state of IE in Serbia in the first five years of its’ implementation (Friedman, Pavlović Babić, & Simić, 2015). An online questionnaire was applied, with voluntary respondents (teachers, school principals, school associates, parents). Consultation meetings on good practice and challenges in IE were held (participants represented all types of schools and all groups of stakeholders), and 5 case studies were realized through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, observation and content analysis of the relevant municipality and school policy documents.

4. Operations and Services of the Network for Support of Inclusive Education: Quality Monitoring Report (hereinafter: the NetIE study). Evaluative study on the support for inclusive education provided by Network was conducted during 2015 (Pavlović Babić & Jovanović, 2015). Two parallel forms of instruments aimed at evaluating professional support and its’ effects were developed for support providers (members of Network) and support users. The instruments were sent by e-mail to all members of IE Network (49% response rate) and to all registered users of Network support in 2014/2015 (65% response rate).

Sample

The structure of participants in all four research studies is summarized in the table below.

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1 Supported by Unicef Serbia and Open Society Fundation Serbia.
2 Supported by Unicef Serbia.
4 Supported by Unicef Serbia.
## Table 1

**Sample structure.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study Title</th>
<th>MIE study</th>
<th>SE study</th>
<th>IES study</th>
<th>NetIE study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(online survey)</td>
<td>(focus group discussion)</td>
<td>(case studies)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>1461</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>1320</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Respondents</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parents</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All parents</td>
<td>610</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>760</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents of students who</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>need additional support</td>
<td>(43)</td>
<td>(15)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Students</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All students</td>
<td>1212</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students who need additional</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>support</td>
<td>(54)</td>
<td>(5)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teachers</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representatives of schools</td>
<td>741</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>3291</td>
<td>1967</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(school associates, principals</td>
<td>(28)</td>
<td>(10)</td>
<td>1967</td>
<td>2707</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and pedagogical assistants</td>
<td>(127)</td>
<td>(18)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members of the IE Network</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representatives of municipal</td>
<td>(28)</td>
<td>(10)</td>
<td>1967</td>
<td>2707</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>authorities</td>
<td>(127)</td>
<td>(18)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representatives of regional</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>school authority offices</td>
<td>(60)</td>
<td>(8)</td>
<td></td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representatives of centers for</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>social work</td>
<td>(10)</td>
<td>(4)</td>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representatives of health centers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(15)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representatives of kindergartens</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(10)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representatives of civil society</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>organizations</td>
<td>(30)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>2589</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>6018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1150</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>149</td>
<td><strong>10332</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* (a) The number of respondents who answered on the questions on IEPs is in the brackets. (b) Categories “All Parents” and “All Students” include parents and students who need additional support.

In addition, the corpus of collected data included 53 IEPs, as well as municipal and school policy documents for each school/municipality participating in the MIE and SE studies.

### Data processing

In all four studies multiple-perspective study design and mixed method approach were adopted. In this paper, we present results of inductive thematic analysis of research reports of four above described studies (Hayes, 2000). Data of the four studies were read carefully to identify meaningful units of text relevant to the research topic. Units of text dealing with the same/similar issue were grouped in analytic categories. The same unit of text could be included in more than one category. The data were reviewed by three independent researchers to ensure that a name, definition, and exhaustive set of data to support each category were identified. The analysis resulted in five key themes: Distribution of IEPs, IEP as a tool for planning and implementing individualized support, IEP and the development of teacher and school competencies, IEP as a tool for developing effective practices.
Results

We will describe the results of our exploration of the IEP as a mediating tool for development of educational practice according to the identified themes. We will describe IEP as a new formal regulatory mechanism and look into the compliance to legislation, in terms of distribution indicating acceptance of IE, and discuss evidence of IEP (in)effectiveness in practice. Since the tool always implies more possible uses than initially prescribed (Engeström, 1990), we will explore the aspects of educational practice affected by the introduction of IEPs, focusing particularly on contradictions and disparate views of different stakeholders.

Distribution of IEP as indicator of acceptance of IE

Education legislation in Serbia requires that IEPs are used for every child that has a need for additional educational support due to social deprivation, learning difficulties, disability or any other reason.

In academic year 2013/14, 1.26% of students in regular schools were educated according to an IEP, out of which 0.81% according to IEP 25 (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2015). However, in special schools and special classes of regular schools instead of the expected 100% of students, only 62% of students were educated according to IEP during 2014/15.

Moreover, findings of MIE study suggest large variations in the distribution of IEPs across the schools: the number of IEPs varies from 1 to 42, with the average of 11.44 IEPs per school ($SD = 8.74$), while 23.1% of schools reported that some classes are attended by more than 3 students using IEP. These results indicate unwillingness of some teachers’ to have ASN students in their classrooms. Indeed, 21.7% schools in MIE study reported that 50% or more of their teachers would not agree with the statement “Each child deserves to attend regular school”, and 37.6% of school principals in IES study state that a few teachers in their school avoid working with ASN students. Hence, the distribution of IEPs seems to be reflecting a dynamic negotiation between the legislation and the personal attitudes of the teachers in a school, rather than direct implementation of national educational policy.

IEP as a tool for collaboration

The preparation, implementation and revision of IEP is the responsibility of the team for additional student support (IEP team). The IEP team is designed for each ASN child and therefore includes parent(s) of the student, homeroom/
class teacher, school associate, and can include other persons who have special expertise regarding the child (e.g., child pediatrician, personal assistant).

Although this is legislative requirement, the MIE study has shown that some regular schools have not established IEP teams (3 out of 28). Moreover, it appears that IEP teams still struggle to serve as a meeting point for school and parents of children from vulnerable groups – 51% of parents whose child is educated according to IEP reported that they are rarely or never invited to IEP team meetings. On the other hand, the majority of parents (63%) perceive that members of IEP team respect them, show willingness to cooperate, appreciate their opinion; 72.4% of parents are satisfied with the work of IEP teams. They recognize that members of the IEP team strive to better understand their child (80.5%), emphasize the child’s strengths (82.0%), note every progress child has made (80.7%), take into account child’s needs (79.2%) and previous progress (84.2%) when developing the IEP. Similarly, participants in regional meetings of IES study assessed IEP teams with average grade 3.7 on a five-point scale. The teams were widely appreciated for their role in securing parental engagement in the education of their children, as well as in improving the school climate and promoting horizontal learning and cooperation among teaching staff. Frequently cited barriers to successful functioning of IEP teams were difficulties to ensure parents’ participation and insufficient training of team members on inclusive education. Excessive administrative work and time constraints were also mentioned.

The situation somewhat differs in special schools and classes. IEP teams are established only in 10% of schools, in most of the others the school’s Expert team for IE became responsible for IEP design (in 76% of schools). These teams usually had meetings once in three months (56%), in rare cases (8%) more frequently. The qualitative examination of the sample of 53 IEPs does not reveal teamwork, however, but suggests that IEPs are usually developed by one person, homeroom or class teacher. Similarly as in the MIE, half of the parents in the qualitative research sample of the SE study report that they are engaged in IEP design, and only one third in its’ revision.

Although we did not explore the reasons for the low parental participation in IEP team meetings, existing research evidence suggests that it could be due to control of school staff over decision making processes (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997), negative attitudes of teachers and other school staff towards parents’ involvement in IEP practice (Fish, 2006) or to social and cultural barriers to parents’ participation in IEP meetings, such as language, cultural differences and educational terminology (Fish, 2006; Hirsh, 2013; Mitchell et al., 2010).

IEP as a tool for planning and implementing individualized support

Each IEP should include information on the student’s current level of academic and functional performance, long-term goals and short-term objectives that focus education interventions and help monitor the child’s progress, and detailed information on the support provided to the student. The IEP team is
obliged to revise IEP once in three months in the first year of its use for the particular child, and at least once in a year in following grades. Findings of the MIE and the SE study indicate that both special and regular schools struggle to develop IEPs that meet all substantive requirements (Table 2). The majority of schools do not update the actual level of the child’s performance, hence adequacy of IEP content becomes questionable. For example, the qualitative study of IEPs in special schools and special classes indicates that teachers usually develop IEPs relying not on student’s current level of performance but on the out-dated reduced programs for children with disabilities, used in years before the introduction of IE and IEP.

Table 2
Percentage of schools modifying specific IEP elements during the review process (based on responses on school questionnaires).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Regular primary schools</th>
<th>Special schools and regular schools with special classes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of school which answered the question</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual level of performance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long-term goals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objectives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steps/activities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In terms of content, several major deficiencies have been identified in the analyzed IEPs from special schools and special classes, which reflect insufficient acceptance of this educational tool in this type of schools: the description of the child’s needs, planned support and targeted objectives are not interconnected, approximately 80% of IEPs do not include individualization of needed support; no pedagogical profile includes information on how the child learns in his/her natural environment and how he/she uses the skills and knowledge gained; supports specified in IEPs are uniform, scarce and not focused on removal of barriers for the particular child; they do not respond to specific needs, they do not include elaborated plan of activities or diversified methods and materials. The weakest parts of IEPs refer to social and communication skills and

independence. The analyzed IEPs in the special schools and special classes seem to be a conflation of the formal characteristics of IEP required by legislation and the content of the special education programs used up to 2009 in these schools.

In parallel with the underdeveloped IEPs, the same study found that lesson plans collected from the same schools do not include the expected degree of individualization – most of the examined lesson plans do not include teaching adjustments to individual children’s needs, nor clear articulation of shared, group and individual objectives and outcomes.

Moreover, transition planning is poorly addressed in IEPs in both regular and special schools. Namely, analysis shows that IEPs were deficient in goals and supports related to post-primary education, employment and daily living skills. Only 31% of special schools reported that they provide support to their students to continue education in regular schools. Similarly, the MIE study shows that parents whose child is educated according to IEP are more dissatisfied with the way their child was prepared for the next level of education ($\chi^2(4, 561) = 16.007, p > .05$) and more often report that transition of their child to the next level of education was exhausting and burdensome experience ($\chi^2(4, 554) = 39.384, p > .01$) in comparison to other parents.

Both MIE and IES studies register that grading of students educated according to IEP causes additional dilemmas for teachers. Students in Serbia are graded against achievement standards set for each grade. On the other hand, students who are educated according to IEP2 require to be assessed against their individualized goals. The members of IE Network highlighted the contradiction between these two systems of grading and teachers’ perception of lacking guidance on when to use which of the two systems. Moreover, MIE study found large discrepancies between different indicators of achievement when it comes to students with disabilities. According to the school survey, students with disability had average mark 2.03 at the end of the year (where 5 is highest and 1 is lowest mark), and yet 70% of these students made a significant progress between two revisions of IEPs and achieved above average results on the final exam administered with appropriate modifications.

All these data gathered on different samples and with varying methodology highlight serious implementation gaps. Although IEP was legislated in 2009, even 6 years later IEP is not fully used as an alternative to the previously ‘one size fits all’ curricula or as a mechanism to guide individualized student assessments and grading.

IEP and the development of teacher and school competencies

The success of educational provision for ASN students is not dependent just on the potentials of the child, but is also strongly linked to the competencies of schools and teachers for developing inclusive practice and climate.

Results obtained in the IES study are consistent with other studies (e.g. Avramidis & Norwich, 2002), which have reported that lack of teacher competencies for inclusive education present obstacle for development of
inclusive education. At the regional meetings the most frequently cited barrier to the successful operation of IEP teams was insufficient training on inclusive education, while 70.2% of participants in online survey stated that lack of teacher competencies is one of the key barriers to more effective inclusive education. In contrast to these findings, the MIE study shows that teachers’ self-assessment of different competencies relevant for IE ranges from 62.2 for development of inclusive culture to 80.2 for communication skills. Competence for development, implementation and revision of IEP is self-assessed 69.6. Conversely, only 24.2% of teachers say that they are familiar with legislation related to IEP and IE.

Interestingly, available support for teachers and schools to develop competencies for IE is not widely used. Preparing and providing trainings for teachers and designing new handbooks and guidebooks on IE was a priority in the last 6 years and offered nationwide free of charge (Kovač Cerović, Pavlović Babić, & Jovanović, 2014), still only 48.6% of teachers from the MIE sample have attended trainings on IE, and only 50.3% of them used available handbooks on IE. The Network of support for IE is yet another mechanism of support aimed at improving quality of inclusive education. The NetIE study indicates that Network members rate their self-efficacy in supporting teachers and schools in the development of IEPs quite high, correspondingly Network support users report that the Network interventions had improved teacher and school competencies regarding IEP and IE ($M = 73.59$, $SD = 21.31$). Still, schools rarely initiate cooperation with the Network. In the MIE study, 60% of schools reported that they have not contacted the Network.

Similarly, special schools as possible resource of support for the development of IE in regular schools are not widely utilized – 40% of regular schools have not cooperated with special schools so far. The SE study also confirms this lack of cooperation – less than one third of special schools (29%) state that their teachers are engaged in providing additional support to other classes or other schools.

Support mechanisms available at school level, however, seem to be perceived as more efficient in providing support for teachers. Participants at regional meetings assessed the contribution of school expert teams for IE to the development of IE with the grade 3.8 (on five-point scale). Participants highlighted the role of school expert teams for IE in securing parental engagement, improving the overall school climate and promoting horizontal learning and peer support among teachers. From the teachers’ perspective school associates (school psychologists and pedagogists), who are members of both school expert teams for IE and each IEP team, have the most important role in developing inclusive practices ($M = 3.5$, $SD = 0.51$; four-point scale). In the MIE study, 97.5% of teachers reported that they ask school associates when they need support regarding IE. The contribution of school associates for providing

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6 The participants are asked to rate their competencies in different fields on the scale ranging from 0 to 100.
individualized support for students from marginalized groups is assessed by teachers with high average grade ($M = 3.44, SD = 0.68$; four-point scale).

Data on teacher competencies and the available support systems, hence indicate that the human relationship of trust and proximity, i.e. the relationship between teachers and school associates working in the same school is by far outweighing any other modality of support for the development of new competencies.

**Effectiveness in practice**

The aim of IEP is the optimal development of a child, its integration into his/her peer group and achievement of educational outcomes (Art. 77, Law on the Foundations of the Education System, 2009). Participants at the IES study’s regional meetings stressed that IEP is effective part of IE in Serbia (3.4). Integration in peer group and self-confidence of ASN students and sensitization of other students are most frequently mentioned as benefits of the IEPs. Similarly, schools from the MIE study perceive that IEP has a highly positive influence on social integration into the peer group ($M = 2.63, SD = 0.58$) and on more regular attendance of classes ($M = 2.65, SD = 0.65$). Moreover, different stakeholders agree that students educated according to IEP make significant progress. The MIE study indicates that 89.2% of parents whose child is educated in regular schools according to IEP are satisfied with their child’s progress, while regular schools assess that on average 70% of students make a significant progress between two IEP revisions. Similarly, the majority of special schools (77%) agree that students educated according to IEP make a progress during the school year.

In addition, process of IEP implementation seems to nurture more effective interaction and partnership between parents and other IEP team members within the schools (Carl, 2002; Polloway & Patton, 1997). The results of the presented studies suggest that even if not universally, the IEP seems to have changed the game in schools where IEP teams have been fully established and provided a new and very welcomed entry for parents into the school–life of their children.

However, the results suggest that IEP development and implementation involve a dynamic labeling process: the MIE study indicates that parents of students who are educated according to IEP more frequently report that they or their child were discriminated in school than parents from the general population ($F(782)= 4.246, p>.05$).

**Discussion**

The results presented show an interesting and complex picture – IEP, although legislated several years ago and widely used, is still not full-heartedly accepted in the schools in Serbia, both regular, and even more so in the special schools. IE and IEP still generate different views on its use, function, and even legitimacy. Our results clearly correspond to the findings of previous research.

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7 These aspects were assessed on a scale ranging from 1 to 3.
on IEP, indicating that different educational systems struggle with similar issues: to develop compliant and meaningful IEPs, ensure parents’ participation, meet workload and paperwork requirements (Blackwell & Rossetti, 2014; Huefner, 2000; Jovanović, 2013; Smith, 1990; Whitworth, 1994).

In discussing the findings, we will rely on activity theory (Engeström, 1987) as a useful context for enriching the understanding of not only the IEP, but IE as well, through unfolding the characteristics of IEP as a mediating tool within the diverse aspects of the school system.

New aspects of understanding arise from viewing IEP as a mediating artefact. Namely, when an activity system, such as inclusive teaching practice, adopts a new element from the outside, such as IEP, this often leads to an aggravated contradiction where some old element collides with the new one (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999; Engeström & Sannino, 2010; Hirsh, 2014). Such contradictions generate dilemmas, disturbances and conflicts, but also innovative attempts to change the activity (Nelson, 2002). We found many indications of conflict, contradiction, dilemma, deriving from “approaching [a] new task with old habits” (Blin, 2004). In several cases new, unprecedented, but often dysfunctional, practices emerged from the contradiction.

A good example of these contradictions between new element and the old one is the dynamic between old and new curriculum regulation in special schools and classes as well as between old and new assessment modalities. The introduction of IEP as a new mediating artifact seems to have instigated need for change that, in this case, created a hybrid between IEP and the former curriculum. The underdeveloped IEPs in special schools conflated by content of the outdated special education programs and the lesson plans neglecting individualization mutually reinforce each other. Further examination is needed to discern how much did the fact that the teachers are implicitly relying on their prior teaching practices based on outdated curricula affect the teachers lack of interest in developing the IEPs and their assessment that IEPs are just an administrative burden—a tool that is anyhow not used and not useful, or vice versa, the fact that special education teachers lack the curriculum development competencies needed for designing appropriate IEPs has influenced their continued reliance on outdated programs. A different kind of new practice emerged from the contradiction between the grading practices used for mainstream children and the one that should be used for children with IEP: in practice both seem to co-exist now in parallel in Serbia.

An activity system is always a community of multiple points of view, traditions and interests (Engeström, 2001). The multi-voicedness can be a source of difficulties and a source of innovation, as it is portrayed in our findings. IEP seems to have empowered parents to participate in the life of the school—a practice that is quite rare in South East Europe (Kovacs Cerovic, Vizek Vidovic, & Powell, 2010), and positioned them in educational discourse together with the professionals from the school. It is striking how strongly parents air their satisfaction with the IEP process—their satisfaction could easily be higher than their actual impact, which provides a telling example of the experience of creation and of acquiring voice. The IEP teams also generate a positive image.
and suggest the emergence of a new collaborative space due to the use of the new mediating artifact, the IEP.

From the perspective of activity theory, the source of conflict can be seen in the rules, as the largely invisible „motivational sphere” of schooling (Engeström, 1998). For instance, data indicates that there is a risk of IEP becoming an administrative requirement instead of being a tool. That seems to have happened in many special schools. We can just guess that this had to do with lack of trainings promoting the new tool, satisfaction with the previous tools, excessive workload, perceived impossibility to individualize teaching, and pressure to fulfill the demands of the official curriculum.

Finally, we found also traces of the collaborative process of knotting (Engeström, 2000) through the engagement of the Network of support for IE, or the lack of it, as data also shows. Surprisingly, our findings indicate existence of another, more efficient „knotworker” in the system – the school associates, as trustworthy peers on the joint journey into inclusive education.

The presented findings, in correspondence with activity theory, suggest that IEP as a new tool created a significant change in the perspectives of different actors. It has also created changes in the rules and division of labour in the schools as they are expected to take higher responsibility for student outcomes than before. Many dilemmas and challenges arose, however an activity theory approach would emphasize the importance of keeping the process of knotworking going despite dilemmas and challenges. Traditional policymaking tends to view dilemmas and contradictions as weaknesses and „implementation gaps” that need to be quickly mended, dissolved, overcome, and if possible simply avoided. Contrary to this view, our research data, viewed through activity theory lenses, provide impetus to cherish all the dilemmas, disputes, and contradictions created through the use of IEP as a new tool. Additionally, in order for systemic contradictions to lead to innovation, their resolution cannot occur at the individual level because contradictions are in relations among groups of people and the tools they use (Wardle, 2004). Therefore, we strongly argue for the exploration of the dilemmas and the tool itself as long as needed for the new practices to consolidate and involve as many diverse actors as possible in collaboration and discussion around preparing, using, assessing and developing IEPs. Utilizing the collaboration potential of IEP would be a real asset for the future.

References


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