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## Cooperation between Preschool Teachers and Parents from the Perspective of the Developmental Status of the Child

Danica Vasiljević-Prodanović <sup>a</sup>, Željko Krneta <sup>b</sup> and Zagorka Markov <sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Faculty of Special Education and Rehabilitation, University of Belgrade, Ringgold Standard Institution, Beograd, Serbia; <sup>b</sup>Research Methodology, Faculty of Sport and Physical Education, University of Novi Sad, Ringgold Standard Institution, Lovcenska, Serbia; <sup>c</sup>Preschool Teacher Training College, Special education and rehabilitation, Vojvodina, Serbia

### ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to determine the perceptions of preschool teachers and parents about their cooperation and to examine whether there are differences in the perception of this cooperation regarding the status of the respondents' children (children of typical development and children with developmental disabilities). The assessment of cooperation was conducted by using the Family Involvement Questionnaire – FIQ (Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs, 2000), adapted for the purposes of this study. The results show that there is a statistically significant difference between the perceptions of preschool teachers and parents regarding parental involvement in preschool activities ( $Z=-5.614$ ;  $p<.01$ ). Parents consider that they participate in preschool activities to a higher extent than perceived by preschool teachers. There is a statistically significant difference in the perception of preschool teachers regarding their cooperation with parents of children of typical development and with parents of children with developmental disorders ( $Z=-2.38$ ;  $p<.05$ ), whereby preschool teachers notice that they have a better cooperation with parents of children of typical development. It can be concluded that there is a need for planning guidelines and implementing practical procedures that would contribute to better cooperation between preschool institutions and parents of children with developmental disabilities.

### KEYWORDS

children; developmental disabilities; education; cooperation

## Introduction

According to the theory of ecological systems, the development of children is shaped by a system of interactions within their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1997). In addition to families, preschool institutions are a significant factor in the development of children. Establishing optimal conditions to develop biological potentials of a child at the preschool age also facilitate a favourable transition from kindergarten to elementary school, development of work habits and autonomy, etc. (Krstić & Zuković, 2017). According to many authors, the cooperation between family and the preschool institution is very important in preparing children for elementary school. (Dockett & Perry, 2001; Fabian & Dunlop, 2007; Gašić-Pavišić & Vujačić, 2008).

Contemporary preschool education aims to develop cooperation of the highest quality between parents and teachers, based on partnership. The most significant factor in this partnership is the active involvement of parents in the activities of their children in educational institutions and at home (Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs, 2000). The traditional conceptual research approach of cooperation between parents and educational institutions is focused on the creation of a family atmosphere that is stimulating for child's education. The new approach, however, strives towards creating a partnership between parents and teachers. In this approach, parental participation in educational work is encouraged, with the aim of achieving more efficient progress in children (Polovina, Jošić, & Ćirović, 2013).

According to Gašić-Pavišić and Vujačić research (2008), the majority of parents view the preparation of children for elementary school in a very narrow fashion, reducing it to developing literacy. Research findings show that in majority of cases child preparation for elementary school within the family is not conducted under the developmental needs of the child, indicating a need for improvement (Gašić-Pavišić & Vujačić, 2008). One of the tasks of preschool institutions is to empower parents to identify their own strengths and the strengths of their children in order to improve the learning process and develop the child's independence in everyday situations (Velišek-Braško & Beljanski, 2013). The new approach to educational work suggests that compulsory forms of learning should be replaced by active forms of acquiring knowledge and experiences (Pavlović Breneselović, Krnjaja 2017), whereby educational work is planned and programmed in accordance with the interests and needs of children (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). The role of the preschool teacher has shifted from the one who teaches and leads, to the one who offers, encourages, organises, advises and directs (Klemenović, 2004; according to: Budin, 1996). Parents are entitled to observe or participate in preschool activities, and also to participate in the planning and programming of educational work with preschool teachers and professional associates (Visković, 2016; Zuković, 2017).

### ***The Importance of Parental Involvement in Preschool Education***

It has been determined that the quality of cooperation between preschool teachers and parents at an early age is a good foundation for better academic achievements and social outcomes (Sanders & Sheldon, 2009; Serpell & Mashburn, 2011; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005; Villeneuve et al., 2013). High-quality parent-teacher cooperation will enable a smoother transition for the child into kindergarten.

In the framework of cooperation with parents, preschool institutions provide various recommendations and monitor their implementation in practice (Markov, Stepanov, & Jelić, 2016). In addition, they develop strategies aimed at improving the educational effects of activities that occur within the family (Becker & Epstein, 1982). The process of cooperation is a multidisciplinary process that requires joint effort, primarily between parents and preschool teachers, of which the latter create strategies of educational work based on data gathered from parents (Kanjić & Boneta, 2012). In this context, parents should participate in all domains of educational work, given that they have a primary influence on the development of their children at an early age, as these are the parents' basic rights and responsibilities (Hujala & Eskelinen, 2013). Parental involvement is also significant in the process of child behavioural assessment in preschool institutions. The

assessment of the child's behaviour, emotional state, skills, abilities, interactions with others, is not possible without adequate information being obtained from parents and preschool teachers in different environments (Vasiljević, 2005; Vasiljević-Prodanović, 2018). Even though data on children obtained from preschool teachers is considered to be more objective, the most complete picture of a child is obtained by combining information from both sources.

The most recent studies confirm the significance of cooperation between families and preschool institutions in the most economically developed countries, such as the USA, Russia and Finland (Vlasov & Hujala, 2017). Cooperation is reflected in the quality of mutual information exchange between preschool teachers and parents with an aim to improve the pedagogical competencies of parents. This two-way process is accompanied by an array of specific circumstances, but the focus of this cooperation should always be the well-being and prosperity of the children (Jelić & Markov, 2018), which includes the involvement of parents (Kragh & Dahl, 2017; Menheere & Hooge, 2010) and volunteers in preschool activities (Epstein, 2005). Many authors have pointed to the importance of involving parents in their children's education (Becker & Epstein, 1982; Christenson, 2004; Epstein et al., 2002; Hongzhu, 2012).

Bearing in mind the fact that the cooperation between preschool teachers and parents represents one of the significant factors of educational work, and especially that it has an impact on the development of children, it would be useful to plan and implement practical procedures with an aim to improve this process. It is recommended that, in order to achieve better cooperation and gain insight into the work of educational institutions, parents become involved in as many activities as possible within the institution (Jelić, Stojković, & Markov, 2018). Some authors emphasise that an important factor of cooperation is the involvement of parents in the managing bodies of preschool institutions, as well as cooperation with the local community (Epstein, 1996).

### ***Competencies of Preschool Teachers and Parents for Cooperation***

Some authors emphasise that preschool teachers should, among other competencies, also possess the competency for cooperation with parents (Samardžić & Travar, 2016). The competencies and skills of preschool teachers related to cooperation with parents, and their attitudes towards this process, are significant factors for the cooperation between preschool institutions and families (Samardžić & Travar, 2016; Sheridan et al., 2018; Visković & Višnjic Jevtić, 2017). The determinants of cooperation between families and preschool institutions are: mutual exchange of information (Skočić Mihić, Blanuša Trošelj, & Katić, 2015), pedagogical education of parents (Marić Jurišin & Klemenović, 2018), parental involvement in preschool educational activities, and parental involvement in the upbringing of children in the family environment (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Epstein et al., 2002; Fantuzzo et al., 2000; Slunjski, 2008).

Many authors emphasise the need for preschool teachers and parents to work on developing the competencies for cooperation and partnership. Preschool teachers improve their competencies through continuous professional development, while there are various ways of organising activities that can improve parenting education (Marić-Jurišin & Klemenović, 2018). Preschool institutions are convenient places for parents to ask questions and seek advice aimed at the successful realisation of the parental role and the

improvement of parenting competencies (Markov & Jelić, 2017; Slunjski, 2008), whereby parents preferably address preschool teachers.

It is noteworthy that parents are least likely to seek help from preschool teachers when they notice problems with their children, assumption being that parents often deny the fact that a problem exists (Visković & Višnjić Jevtić, 2017). On the other side, preschool teachers often hesitate to turn the attention of parents to assessments related to the development of their child due to fear (Skočić Mihić et al., 2015). Research has also shown that parents and teachers often disagree about a child's level of functioning, whereby teachers rate a child's developmental disability more severely than parents (Shin, Viet Nhan, Crittenden, Valenti, & Hong, 2008). Therefore, in the context of lifelong learning, it is necessary that preschool teachers develop advisory competencies, even though they do not belong to the helping professions. Enhancement of teachers' advisory skills is also significant because they provide various recommendations to parents and follow their implementation, for example, when they notice that the developmental level of the child is below expected. (Markov et al., 2016). In practice, preschool teachers more often use their advisory skills indirectly in cooperation with parents (Cheatham & Ostrosky, 2011; Markov et al., 2016).

Parents differ in their abilities to develop and maintain partnerships with preschool teachers. Studies have shown that parents of lower education levels participate less in cooperation, compared to parents of higher education levels (Hill & Taylor, 2004; Magnuson, Sexton, Davis-Kean, & Huston, 2009). The results of the research conducted by Mandarić Vukušić (2018) shows that parents in teaching professions (kindergarten teachers, teachers, pedagogues) have more desirable beliefs regarding child-rearing practices and a more contemporary views on the child and their abilities, compared to parents in non-teaching professions. Those findings show that the levels of parents education and their professional competencies may influence their levels of cooperation with preschool teachers.

An international study, conducted in five European countries, showed significant differences in the approaches of preschool teachers to the parent-teacher relationship (Hujala, Turja, Gaspar, Veisson, & Waniganayake, 2009). The differences in the professional status of preschool teachers have the greatest impact on the quality of cooperation. The preschool teacher should be familiar with the particularities of a child's family, aiming to provide conditions for parent to be an active participant in preschool activities. (Zuković, 2017). The study conducted by Polovina and Vesić (2017) indicated that preschool teachers and parents accept traditional views on cooperation. In addition, this study showed that preschool teachers estimated that their contribution to the willingness to cooperate, as well as the development of initiative and creative behaviour, was somewhat higher than that of the parents (Polovina & Vesić, 2017).

The communication skills of preschool teachers are based on active listening, asking questions, reflecting, explaining and redefining, transferring information through the exchange of ideas, feelings, perceptions, intercultural communicative abilities, etc. (Daniels & Stafford, 2001; Perry & Southwell, 2011; Samardžić & Travar, 2016; Visković, 2016). Recent studies demonstrated that preschool teachers considered that formal education did not qualify them for this important area. Some authors pointed out that there is a need for additional education of teachers in the area of cooperation with parents (Sheridan, Edwards Pope, Marvin, & Knoche, 2009).

## *The Significance of Parent-Teacher Cooperation in Inclusive Education*

The cooperation between the family and the inclusive preschool institution has many benefits for families of children with developmental disabilities, for families of typically developed children, as well as for preschool teachers. The process of cooperation between preschool teachers and parents, in addition to being beneficial for the child, also enables others to learn and gain experience. Active family involvement has been identified as a key element to the success of inclusive early childhood education programs (Hrnjica, 2006; Xu & Filler, 2008). Through cooperation with the preschool institution, parents are able to get to know their child as a member of a group, to familiarise themselves with the child's behaviour, their relationship with other children, and attitudes towards learning (Krnjaja & Miškeljin, 2006). Parents of children with developmental disabilities become less socially isolated, they obtain an opportunity to widen their contacts in a diverse environment, learn about the typical development of children, and more. Parents of children of typical development gain an opportunity to accept diversity and modify their attitudes towards differences. Preschool teachers develop and maintain their professional competencies and motivation for working with children with developmental disabilities (Sretenov, 2008).

The partnership between preschool teachers and parents, in an inclusive educational program, is reflected in the mutual acceptance of responsibilities and fulfilment of parental obligations. A team is formed for each child in need of support, whereby the preschool teacher and parent jointly plan an individualised program of preschool and home activities, and monitor its effects. In addition to the feeling that their child is accepted, parents have the knowledge that all conditions for the child's development, in accordance with the child's abilities, are provided (Srđić, 2010; Vlah & Tatalović Vorkapić, 2011). This is significant for children with developmental disabilities, and their parents, because they gain an opportunity to start early intervention (Farrell, Elliott, & Ison, 2004; Sheridan et al., 2009). The cooperation between the family and the preschool institution contributes to positive developmental outcomes in children, such as less behavioural problems (Vlah & Tatalović Vorkapić, 2011; El Nokali, Bachman, & Votruba-Drzai, 2010; Bašić, Ferić, & Kranželić, 2001; Olsen & Fuller, 2008) and better academic achievements (McNeal, 1999). Research results have shown that the quality of cooperation influences the promotion and development of socio-emotional competencies in children (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Markov & Jelić, 2017).

## *Inclusive Education Practice in Serbia*

From the beginning of the 1990s, preschool institutions in Serbia have become contemporary institutions (Pavlović Breneselović, 2010; Polovina, 2007) in which cooperation between parents and preschool teachers, based on two-way communication and trust between equal participants, is continuously enhanced (Lewis & Forman, 2002; Widding, 2012). The initiative for cooperation between parents and preschool institutions is most often established by the preschool teacher, who is in regular contact with parents (Daniels & Stafford, 2001; Oranit, 2016; Skočić Mihić et al., 2015). At the same time, there have been major changes in preschool education. One of the most important novelties has been the introduction of inclusive education.

Inclusive education in the Republic of Serbia was established in the 2009 *Law on the Fundamentals of the Education System* (the new law was enacted in). Merely two decades ago, there was a clear demarcation between education within the family and institutional education. This was confirmed by studies in which parents expressed views that they did not wish to get involved in the work of preschool institutions, or that legal frameworks were such that the education of children in institutions was the exclusive responsibility of preschool teachers (Andrejević, 2005; Petrović-Sočo, 1995). Today, early education cannot be achieved without the participation of parents. Participation is particularly important for families with children with developmental disabilities (Andrejević, 2005; Daniels & Stafford, 2001; Khalifa, Khalil, & AlKhamra, 2017; Sretenov, 2008). According to the latest legal regulations in Serbia, preschool institutions are supposed to cooperate with families, and the programme of cooperation is developed on the basis of an assessment of needs, possibilities, and interests of the family. Different forms of family involvement get implemented in preschool institutions and support is provided for the realisation of the educational role of families in accordance with their needs; counselling, open doors, thematic meetings, etc. (*Rulebook on the standards of the quality of work of institutions*, 2018).

### Current Study

The current study was based on the theoretical background and the findings of previous research (Jelić et al., 2018; Mandarić Vukušić, 2018; Miljak, 1995; Petrović-Sočo, 1995; Stančić & Stanisljević-Petrović, 2013; Visković & Višnjić Jevtić, 2017). It was assumed that there were differences in the perception of preschool teachers and parents regarding their cooperation, and that there were differences in the perception of cooperation depending on the developmental status of children. The research subject is the cooperation between the family and the preschool institution, which implies the involvement of both factors of education as equal partners who act together with an aim to achieve positive educational outcomes in the child.

In our study we formulated two major research questions:

(1) Are there any differences in the perception of preschool teachers and parents regarding their mutual cooperation?

(2) Specifically, are there any differences in the perception of cooperation depending on the developmental status of the respondents' children (children of typical development and children with developmental disabilities)?

**Table 1.** Educator and parent demographics.

Characteristics		Parents (N = 193)	Educators (N = 142)
Gender	male	26	8
	female	167	134
Age (M± SD)	male	35.7 ± 6.3	29.3 ± 3.4
	female	33.1 ± 5.5	41.3 ± 10.6

## Materials and Methods

### Sample

The sample consisted of 193 parents of children who attended the Preparatory programme for starting elementary school in 2017/18, and 142 preschool teachers of children whose parents participated in the survey (Table 1).

Out of the total number of 542 parents who were invited, 234 parents agreed to take part in the survey. A total of 193 parents submitted completed questionnaires to the researchers within the deadline set for returning the questionnaire. All 142 preschool teachers agreed to take part in the survey and submitted completed questionnaires.

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the intended use of the results, confidentiality of data and anonymity. Researchers obtained freely given and informed consent in explicit form from all participants. Participants were told they could end their participation at any time.

The sample of parents consisted of 114 parents of children of typical development ( $M = 6.24$ ;  $SD = .49$ ) and 79 parents of children with developmental disabilities ( $M = 6.19$ ;  $SD = .51$ ). Children were classified during their enrolment to kindergarten, based on medical documentation on existing developmental disorders, and the assessment by kindergarten multidisciplinary team based on 8 indicators (health, motor skills, emotions, hygienic habits, thinking, speech, hearing, vision).

### Instruments

The Family involvement questionnaire (FIQ; Fantuzzo et al., 2000), adapted for the purposes of this research, was used for the assessment of the perception of parents' involvement in their child's education. The original instrument is based on the Theory of Ecological Systems, according to which the family system is considered 'the most influential and proximal system in children's early education' (offers, encourages, organises Fantuzzo, McWayne, Perry, & Childs, 2004; according to: Bronfenbrenner, 1992, p. 468).

The instrument was translated and adapted to local conditions, with a reduced number of items (the original instrument contains 42 items). The instrument contains 34 items in the form of a questionnaire on a four-point Likert scale (1 = never; 2 = rarely; 3 = often; 4 = always). The questionnaire provided information on the nature and level of involvement of parents in their child's education. The factor structure of the scale was defined by three dimensions and consisted of three subscales: (1) *Home-Based Involvement* – HBI (10 items), (2) *Home-School Conferencing* – HSC (13 items) and (3) *School-Based Involvement* – SBI (11 items). The questionnaire was designed for use with preschool teachers, with a version adapted for parents. The parent version contained identical items as the teachers' version, with statements partially redesigned.

The reliability of the instrument was tested by Cronbach's alpha coefficient and it was found that the scale had a high reliability of .93 for the overall scale, as well as for the subscales (HBI = .88; HSC = .86; SBI = .83). This finding is in line with the results of previous studies (Jelić et al., 2018) and indicates a high reliability and internal consistency of the instrument.



## Procedure

The research was conducted from February to May 2018. The data was collected from a sample of preschool teachers and parents in 7 cities and 9 preschool institutions through a survey questionnaire. The authors conducted the survey with the help of a group of students from the Preschool Teacher Training College. Before starting the research, the authors contacted the authorities in preschool institutions, explained the goals and method of the research and asked for approval to conduct the survey. Preschool teachers and parents were provided with information about the research with an invitation to take part in the survey. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the intended use of the results, and they were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality of the data. The results of encrypted questionnaires were only available to researchers.

## Statistical Analysis

The questionnaire data was condensed based on the applied model with three subcategories. Summarised sub scores were obtained by summarising the responses on the items, and then certain average scores for each respondent were determined. For the defined variables HBI, HSC and SBI, descriptive statistics were calculated: mean, standard deviation, minimal and maximum value, especially for groups of preschool teachers, parents, children of typical development, and children with disabilities. The normality of distribution was tested using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test.

Since distribution in all three variables deviated significantly from normal distribution, the analysis of the differences between groups was performed using the nonparametric Mann-Whitney U test. The effect size was estimated by calculating the absolute value  $r$  from the Z coefficient by the formula  $abs(r) = Z/\sqrt{N}$ , where N is the total number of cases.

**Table 2.** Basic descriptive statistics of analysed variables for parents and preschool teachers.

Group	Statistic	HBI	HSC	SBI
Preschool teachers (N = 142)	Mean	2.92	2.85	2.19
	Standard deviation	.56	.61	.60
	Minimum	1.62	1.36	1.10
	Maximum	4.00	4.00	4.00
	Kolmogorov-Smirnov	.01	.02	.01
Parents (N = 193)	Mean	2.99	2.94	2.54
	Standard deviation	.50	.54	.51
	Minimum	2.00	2.00	1.20
	Maximum	4.00	4.00	4.00
	Kolmogorov-Smirnov	.01	.01	.01

**Table 3.** Differences in the perception of cooperation between parents and preschool teachers (N = 335).

Variable	Group	Mean rank	Median	Z	P
HBI	Teachers	187.08	2.92	-1.132	.257
	Parents	199.92	3.00		
HSC	Teachers	185.80	2.85	-1.358	.174
	Parents	201.20	3.00		
SBI	Teachers	162.58	2.20	-5.459	.001**
	Parents	224.42	2.50		

\*significant at  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\* significant at  $p \leq .01$

**Table 4.** Differences in the cooperation with preschool institution depending on the development of children, according to the observations of preschool teachers.

Variable	Group	N	Mean rank	Z	P
HBI	Typical development	114	106.57	-3.681	.001**
	With disabilities	79	83.19		
HSC	Typical development	114	100.27	-2.910	.004**
	With disabilities	79	92.28		
SBI	Typical development	114	98.01	-1.927	.054*
	With disabilities	79	95.54		

\*significant at  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\* significant at  $p \leq .01$

**Table 5.** Differences in the cooperation with preschool institution depending on the development of children, according to the observations of parents.

Variable	Group	N	Mean rank	Z	P
HBI	Typical development	114	104.42	-2.227	.026*
	With disabilities	79	86.29		
HSC	Typical development	114	108.18	-3.347	.001**
	With disabilities	79	80.87		
SBI	Typical development	114	106.63	-2.892	.004**
	With disabilities	79	83.10		

\*significant at  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\* significant at  $p \leq .01$

The significance of the effect size was estimated by the criterion: small effect = .1; medium effect = .3; large effect = .5 (Cohen, 1988).

For all applied tests, a statistical significance was tested at the level  $p \leq .05$ . Data processing was performed in the statistical package IBM SPSS 20.0 (ID: 729,225).

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

An overview of the basic descriptive characteristics of the analysed variables (Table 2) showed that both groups of respondents had a positive perception of the cooperation of parents with the preschool institution, as indicated by the average values greater than the scale median (2.0). In both groups of respondents, the distribution of results statistically significantly deviated from the normal distribution for all three variables. The parents showed a somewhat greater homogeneity in the distribution of results than preschool teachers.

### Analysis of the Cooperation between Teachers and Parents

The analysis of the differences in the perception of cooperation between preschool teachers and parents (Table 3) showed the existence of a statistically significant difference ( $p \leq .001$ ) only for the SBI variable, having a medium effect size ( $r = .28$ ). Parents showed a significantly more positive attitude in relation to *School-Based Involvement* (SBI) than preschool teachers, as indicated by the higher mean rank values and median. It is also noticeable that, in the case of the remaining two variables, parents also had a more positive attitude than preschool teachers.

The analysis of the differences in the perception of preschool teachers regarding the cooperation with the preschool institution in relation to the status of the children (Table 4) showed statistically significant differences for all three variables. For the HBI variable the difference was statistically significant with a 1% estimation error and a small effect size ( $r = .19$ ). Preschool teachers assessed their cooperation with parents of typically developed children as significantly better. This was also the case with the HSC variable, with a small effect size ( $r = .15$ ), while the differences for the SBI variable were statistically significant at the 5% significance level and a small effect size ( $r = .10$ ).

The analysis of the differences in the perception of parents regarding the cooperation with preschool teachers in relation to the status of the children (Table 5) showed statistically significant differences for all three variables. In case of the HBI variable, the difference was statistically significant with a 5% estimation error and a small effect size ( $r = .16$ ). In case of variables HSC and SBI there was statistical significance at the level of 1% and a small effect size ( $r = .24$  and  $r = .21$  respectively). The parents of children of typical development assessed their cooperation with the preschool institution, in case of all three variables, significantly better compared to the parents of children with developmental disabilities.

## Discussion

Previous studies have highlighted the involvement of parents in the activities of educational institutions as a significant factor (Arnold, Zeljo, & Doctoroff, 2008; Christenson, 2004; Rivas & Sobrino, 2011). The results of our research show that the differences between preschool teachers and parents in their perception of parental involvement in kindergarten activities are statistically significant. Namely, parents believe that they are involved in the activities to a higher extent than preschool teachers believe them to be.

The results also show that there is a statistically significant difference in the preschool teachers' perception of mutual information exchange with parents depending on child development. By analysing the mean rank, it can be concluded that preschool teachers perceive their cooperation with parents of typically developed children as better than cooperation with parents of children with developmental disabilities. This finding is in accordance with previous research stating that parents deny the fact that their child has a developmental disability and that they therefore rarely address it with preschool teachers (Castro, Bryant, Peisner-Feinberg, & Skinner, 2004; Mattingly, Prislín, McKenzie, Rodriguez, & Kayzar, 2002). Parents who deny the fact that there is a problem are less likely to seek help from preschool teachers when they themselves notice problems in their child's development (Visković & Višnjić Jevtić, 2017). Smith, Stern, and Shatrova (2008) extracted following factors that inhibit parental involvement in their children schools: 'the failure of the school to send correspondence, school calendar, lunch menus or newsletters written in Spanish; the inability of the parents to speak and understand English in personal communication with the school, and the reluctance of the parents to question authority or to advocate for the rights of their children' (Smith et al., 2008, p. 8). In the conditions of inclusive education, adopted in recent years as a solution in Serbia and other countries in the region, preschool teachers are making efforts to achieve communication and information exchange with the parents of children from vulnerable groups (Jeić, Smiljanić, & Kuljašević, 2013; Jelić et al., 2018).

The same was confirmed by the results that indicate that parents of typically developed children perceive their cooperation with preschool teachers as being better than

parents of children with developmental disabilities do. This confirms the results of the studies stating that parents of children with developmental disabilities in Serbia are rarely partners in the process of education in which their children are involved (Lazarević & Kopas-Vukašinović, 2013). Preschool teachers indicate as a problem the fact that parents do not accept the 'truth about their child' and are often dishonest. There are also problems which most often arise because children of typical development imitate the child with a developmental disorder. This is something that parents of children of typical development dislike, and often make remarks about to preschool teachers. (Stanisavljević-Petrović & Stančić, 2010). It is precisely the cooperation between preschool institutions and parents which contributes to the suppression of these stereotypes. By strengthening the relationships through preschool activities involving the parents of children with developmental disabilities and the children themselves, it is possible to overcome these problems (Fantuzzo et al., 2000).

Some authors point out the issue of the quality of inclusive preschool education in terms of access to, and participation of children with disabilities, in curriculum-based activities (Vlachou & Fyssa, 2016). According to the authors, neither characteristics of the programme, nor teacher-related characteristics, are associated with the quality of the education programme. In light of our research findings, it would be interesting to examine whether there is an association between the quality of an inclusive programme and the level of parent-teacher cooperation.

## Conclusion

The findings of our study show that both groups of respondents have a positive perception of the cooperation of parents with the preschool institution (average scores on the scale for both groups are greater than the scale median). When it comes to the perception of the level of cooperation, it can be concluded that preschool teachers and parents consider that there is a need to encourage cooperation at all levels. A statistically significant difference between preschool teachers and parents exists in perceiving the level of parental involvement in preschool activities ( $p \leq .001$ ,  $r = .28$ ). Preschool teachers estimate that the level of parental involvement in preschool activities is lower than the parents themselves consider it to be. Bearing in mind that the initiative for cooperation is the task of the preschool institution, it can be concluded that preschool teachers should work on the development of competencies for cooperation and communication skills. One of the recommendations for future research would be to examine the competencies of preschool teachers for cooperation and their attitudes regarding the cooperation between the preschool institution and the parents.

When it comes to perceiving cooperation in relation to the developmental status of the children, it can be concluded that preschool teachers estimate that the level of involvement in education at home is lower in the case of parents of children with developmental disabilities, compared to parents of children of typical development. The analysis of parent responses indicates that parents of children with developmental disabilities assess their cooperation with the preschool institution significantly lower than parents of children of typical development when it comes to all observed levels of cooperation – HBI ( $p \leq .05$ ,  $r = .16$ ), HSC ( $p \leq .01$ ,  $r = .24$ ), SBI ( $p \leq .01$ ,  $r = .21$ ). This finding points to the need to develop forms of cooperation that will encourage the involvement of parents of children with developmental disabilities in the activities of the preschool institution. Future research could examine, in more detail, the

attitudes of parents and preschool institutions towards the developmental disabilities of children and to determine the factors that hinder cooperation.

Lamb-Parker et al. research (2001) identified several factors as actual barriers to parent involvement in Head Start programmes: parents' schedule that conflicted with programme; having a baby or toddler at home; working, going to school or volunteering outside Head Start during the year or during day, feeling sad, depressed, feeling lack of energy or little interest in things. Having one or more children with learning or physical disability or behaviour problems was not identified as a barrier to parent involvement (Lamb-Parker et al., 2001). The results of a recent survey conducted in Serbia on a sample of 763 parents are encouraging, as they show that a significant percentage of parents are involved in kindergarten activities (Marković, Stanisavljević-Petrović, & Mamutović, 2020).

Our research has several limitations. First, to our knowledge, a relatively small number of studies have addressed parental involvement in kindergarten activities. Most studies have examined parental involvement in their child education from elementary through high school years. Therefore, we were limited in comparing our findings with other studies. Second, in our research we did not examine the differences between parents controlling for types of child developmental disabilities. It would be useful to further examine whether the type of disability of the child affects the level of parental involvement in kindergarten activities. The research was conducted on a relatively small sample of respondents from Vojvodina, a part of Serbia. Therefore, we should be cautious in generalising the results.

The findings of the study indicate that the new roles of parents and preschool teachers in the educational process are not sufficiently developed. Contemporary trends in the creation of preschool curricula indicate the need for parents to play an active role in all segments of the preschool institution activities. The preschool institution is supposed to provide support to parents by informing them about the legal possibilities, organising meetings and empowering parents to take up the position of partners in the process of their children's education and learning. On the other hand, parents should show greater initiative when it comes to their involvement in all stages of educational work, from planning to the implementation of programmes, as well as to the improvement of their parental and pedagogical competencies.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## ORCID

Danica Vasiljević-Prodanović  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5236-1308>

Željko Krneta  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4779-7673>

Zagorka Markov  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7394-3195>

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