

## **General and special education teachers' relations within teamwork in inclusive education: socio-demographic characteristics**

**Marina Radić-Šestić and Vesna Radovanović**

Department of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Persons, University of Belgrade, Serbia

**Biljana Milanović-Dobrota**

Department of Persons with Disabilities in Mental Development, University of Belgrade, Serbia

[biljanamilanovicdobrota@gmail.com](mailto:biljanamilanovicdobrota@gmail.com)

**Sanela Slavkovic**

Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation, University of Novi Sad, Serbia

**Ana Langović-Milićević**

Faculty of Business Studies, Megatrend University, Belgrade, Serbia

*The general objective of this study was to establish the relation between general and special education teachers within teamwork and to define socio-demographic factors that affect teamwork. The sample encompassed 223 general and special education teacher of both genders, age 25 to 60, who are employed in regular elementary schools in Serbia. The general and special education teachers approach data, according to the six dimensions of teamwork, were obtained by means of a standardized questionnaire for teamwork supervision, which contains 60 assertions (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.907$ ). Our research results indicate that there is no significant difference between general and special education teachers in their perception of the four out of six dimensions of teamwork. They are aware of the environment in which teamwork operates, they have similar behaviour and abilities, and they respect similar teamwork values. However, the transition, from traditional to inclusive education, brings the problem of general education teachers' professional identity ( $p = 0.043$ ) and the meaning of interrelations with special education teachers, the significance of teamwork in broader social sense, and the benefits of teamwork outside the institution ( $p = 0.049$ ).*

**Keywords:** general education teacher; inclusive education; inclusive school; special education teacher; teamwork

### **Introduction**

The concept of teamwork<sup>1</sup> is not a new one, because the idea of teams has been around for centuries starting from tribal communities where the roles were unwritten, but clearly known. People have been alienated by the development and modernization of society, but in the course of the last few decades, and especially with the development of management, it was discovered that the key to success often lies in teamwork. The significance of teamwork, that places its goals before the ones of individuals, is increasingly recognized. This does not mean that teamwork implies the loss of individuality, nor is the individual's ability questioned, on the contrary. The purpose of teamwork

is not in the unification of postulates, but in highlighting the problems from various perspectives and positions so that diverse standpoints either of different experts or experts from the same domain are appreciated. Therefore, a team approach implies a high degree of interaction among members so that they can generate new ideas creatively and realize important goals, which can be deduced from definitions of various authors.

The word team can be perceived as an acronym for the English word TEAM: T-together, E-everyone, A-achieve, M-more (Kobolt & Žižak, 2007). When Francis & Young (1979) described it as a group of people that channel their energy towards realization of a common goal, they had in mind an ideal team. Similar definitions of the term team can be found in the works of other authors. Annet and Stanton (2000) define team as a group whose members share the same goal which they have established jointly. Johnson and Johnson (2006) state that the term is related to a set of interpersonal interactions structured in such a manner so that the common goal can be achieved. The team is a group of people with complementary skills who are equally loyal and committed to the common objective and meaning of work, as well as to the approach of problem solving while there is a strong sense of mutual responsibility.

Belbin (1993) analysed the individual roles of team members in detail and reached the conclusion that they are influenced by: personal traits, cognitive abilities, values and motivation, environmental factors, work experience and previously learned social roles. The individual affiliation to the group, interest for the job, ability to realize new ideas, manner of expressing opinions, knowledge acquired through formal and informal education, creativity, aptitude and other potentials are thereby reflected in the team role (Kobolt & Žižak, 2007).

The teamwork between general and special education teachers in inclusive education. Historically, teachers have worked in isolation – one teacher to a classroom. As children with disabilities entered the public schools in the 1980s, they were taught in separate classrooms with their own teachers. Over the past 25 years in America and Europe, these students have slowly moved into the flow of the regular classroom, thus the use of the term "mainstreaming". However, students were mainstreamed for selected subjects or parts of the day only; they were not considered part of the typical class. Now the philosophy is to include all students in the same class, which has brought about teams of general or regular education and special education teachers who work collaboratively or cooperatively to combine their professional knowledge, perspectives, and skills.

The biggest change for educators is in deciding to share the role that has traditionally been individual: to share the goals, decisions, classroom instruction, responsibility for students, assessment of student learning, problem solving, and classroom management. Cooperative teaching is described as "an educational approach in which general and special educators work in co-active and coordinated fashion to jointly

teach heterogeneous groups of students in educationally integrated settings...“ (Bauwens, Hourcade & Friend, 1989:36). An effective team of teachers will work together as equal partners in interactive relationships, with both involved in all aspects of planning, teaching, and assessment. Areas for this collaboration will include curricula and instruction, assessment and evaluation, and classroom management and behavior.

Typically, the primary responsibility of special education teachers is to provide instruction by adapting and developing materials to match the learning styles, strengths, and special needs of each of their students with disabilities. In special education situations, individual learners' needs often dictate the curricula. General educators bring content specialization to the team, while special education teachers bring assessment and adaptation specializations. Both bring training and experience in teaching techniques and learning processes. Their collaborative goal is that all students (students with disabilities and their typical peers) in their class are provided with appropriate classroom and homework assignments so that each is learning, is challenged, and is participating in the classroom process (Dettmer, Thurston & Dyck, 2005; Volonino & Zigmond, 2007).

The team approach of general and special education teachers proved to be useful for all students in an inclusive school, which should provide all prerequisites for their joint work (Villa, Thousand, Nevin & Liston, 2005; Hunt, Soto, Maier & Doering, 2003). To that effect, it is necessary for the common beliefs, activities and principles of school team actions to be well articulated and equally applied in internal (school) and external conditions (local and broader community) (Peters, 2004).

As collaborative teaching becomes a common approach to inclusion, special education and general education co-teachers with different education and expectations work as teams in regular education classrooms. How do special education and general education teachers differ in their perceptions of their responsibilities in teamwork? The general objective of this research is to establish the relations of general and special education teachers with certain dimensions of teamwork in the school. More specifically, our intentions were to determine whether there is a distinction among a) subjects of male and female gender, b) subjects of different age group, c) participants with diverse work experience, d) educational level, and e) socio-cultural milieu of the elementary schools that the participants are employed in.

## **Methodology**

### **Research participants**

The research encompassed 223 participants of both genders (44 or 19.7% of male gender and 179 or 80.3% of female gender) ages 25 to 60. Disparity of sample according to gender is a consequence of feminization of the teacher professions which is traditionally present. The sample included 112 or 50.2% of general and 111 or 49.8% of special education teachers who are employed in elementary schools.

General education teachers are educated at the Faculty of Teacher Education, and special education teachers at the Faculty of Special Education and Rehabilitation. Up

until a decade ago, general education teachers worked in regular schools with only children with typical development, and special education teachers in special schools with children with disabilities. Through the introduction of children with disabilities into regular education classrooms, general education teachers were given the option of forming a collaborative partnership with special education teachers.

**Table 1** Sample distribution according to scientific domain and age group

Age group	General education teachers		Special education teachers		$\Sigma$	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
25-35	38	17	38	17	76	34.1
36-45	44	19.7	37	16.6	81	36.3
46-60	30	13.4	36	16.1	66	29.6
$\Sigma$	112	50.2	111	49.8	223	100

The sample included 76 or 34.1% of participants aged 25 to 35, 81 or 36.3% of participants aged 36 to 45, and 66 or 29.6% of participants aged 46 to 60. Sample distribution according to participants' scientific domain (general and special education) and age group indicates that 38 or 17% of special education teachers (experts that work with children with developmental disabilities) and the same number of general education teachers aged 25 to 35 are included in this field. The group of participants aged 36 to 45 contains 37 or 16.6% of special and 44 or 19.7% of general education teachers. The oldest group of participants (aged 46 – 60) consists of 36 or 16.1% of special and 30 or 13.4% of general education teachers (see Table 1).

The participants are unified according to the scientific domain (general and special education) and age group ( $p = 0.456$ ), work experience, educational level ( $p = 0.547$ ) and socio-cultural milieu ( $p = 0.255$ ). The socio-cultural milieu of elementary schools where the participants are employed in points to the fact that 120 of them (53.8%) work in larger work organizations (elementary schools) and 103 of them (46.2%) in smaller schools situated in Serbia.

The number of participants that had finished basic academic studies (bachelor, last four years – 240 ESPB) is 107 or 48%, and the number of participants that had finished postgraduate academic studies (Masters', last five years – 300 ESPB) is 116 or 52%. The test sample is not balanced according to work experience ( $p \leq 0.000$ ), because it consists mainly of the participants with work experience from 5 to 15 years (84 or 37.7%) and from 15 to 25 years (27.4%). The number of participants with work experience between 1 to 5 years is 55 or 24.7%, and the lowest number belonged to participants with work experience longer than 25 years (23 or 10.3%).

#### Research procedures

After obtaining the consent of the school management, the researchers conducted a

study during April and May 2012. The study was conducted in two cities, Belgrade (about 2 million inhabitants), the capital of the Republic of Serbia and Novi Sad (about 350,000 inhabitants), representative of the smaller urban environment. The original idea was that the sample should encompass all employed teachers of the schools on the territory of both cities. However, many participants (especially from Belgrade) did not wish to participate because of the specific allegations in the instrument (for example, we resolve conflicts together, we do not have unresolved conflicts among us, no distractions at joint meetings, we determine the obstacles that aggravate our work and so on). The participants individually filled in the paper-based questionnaire and the researcher was present only if certain linguistic or contextual dilemmas appeared. The examination time ranged from 10–15 minutes per participant.

**Table 2** Teamwork dimensions

	Dimensions	The set of questions
1.	Environment	Team size, effects of changes in the environment, cognition of the group work methods, awareness of the role within the team, awareness of the quality of the relations with associates outside the team, presentation of one’s ideas, communication in joint meetings, good organization of meetings
2.	Conduct	Mutual respect and support within the team, joint work, closeness, compliance with collaboration rules, coordinated work, positive atmosphere, mutual trust and praises
3.	Abilities	Openness in communication and work ideas, identification of work obstacles, joint resolution of conflicts, mutual understanding, work creativity, awareness that together we are stronger, planning and organization
4.	Values	Respecting team-members autonomy, no unresolved conflicts, interconnectivity, learning from each other, exchange of views, following the leader and being the leader, common beliefs, team affirmation
5.	Identity	Harmonization of personal with common goals, individual development, tasks and roles distribution, the significance of work, respecting different abilities and talents, interconnection, tolerance for diversity
6.	Meaning	Team development, conformity of personal and team visions, joint contribution, interrelations influence on work, experiencing the teamwork significance in broader social sense, teamwork benefits outside the institution

The questionnaire for the teamwork supervision (Kobolt & Žižak, 2007, according to Maaß & Ritschl, 1998) with 60 assertions reflecting opinions and attitudes of employees regarding teamwork through six dimensions (Table 2) was used for the pur-

pose of this research. The results are processed for individual fields and the questionnaire as a whole. The value of Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient is 0.907 and represents a reliable correlation level among the set of questions within the examined teamwork dimensions.

### Statistical data processing

In the course of the data processing we used descriptive statistics methods, non-parametric variance analysis (Kruskal-Wallis test),  $F$  test, and reliable analysis.

### Research results

Monitoring general and special education teachers' relations within teamwork through certain dimensions gives us information regarding the following: a) the assessment grade of teamwork as a process, and b) which teamwork abilities they possess.

The participants' teamwork global score values range from 16 to 60 points through which we formed five categories of participants. The first category of participants whose scores are up to 20 points deviate the most from teamwork, while the fifth category contains global scores ranging from 51–60 points, which indicates that the participants are very pleased with their status in the team as well as with the functioning of the team they belong to. It was established that the obtained results have an extremely high degree of reliability by means of an  $F$  test ( $F = 4026.773$ ,  $p \leq 0.000$ ).

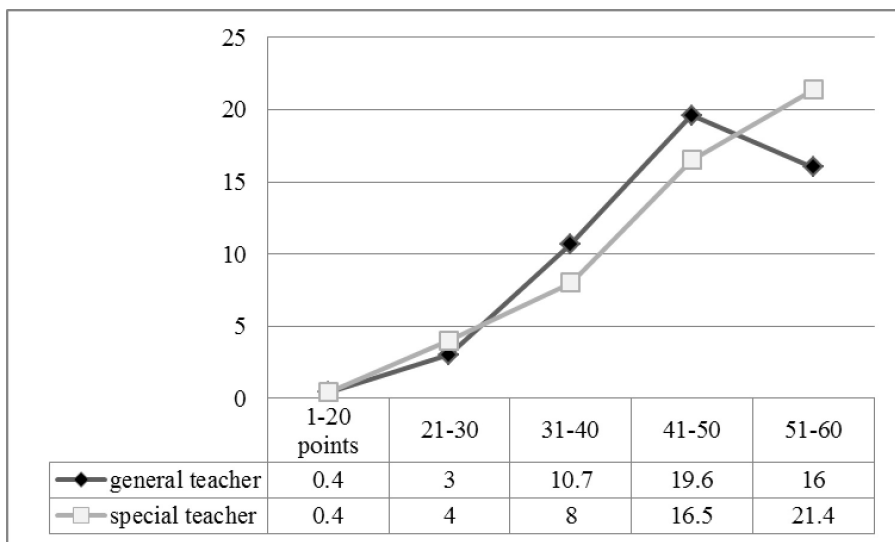


Figure 1 Global score value according to categories 1 to 5

The global score values according to these categories indicate that the highest number of special education teachers, 48 or 21.4% of them have achieved an excellent ranking, and 37 or 16.5% very good ranking in satisfaction with the teamwork. The global score value, according to these categories, of general education teachers is somewhat poorer, although the largest number of them have achieved very good (36 or 16%) and excellent ranking (44 or 19.6%) in satisfaction within teamwork. Furthermore, larger numbers of general education teachers (24 or 10.7%) have a good score in the satisfaction category regarding teamwork than special education teachers (17 of 8%).

Table 3 General and special education teachers' relations and teamwork dimensions

Teamwork dimensions	<i>H</i>	df	<i>p</i>
Environment	0.337	1	0.561
Conduct	2.044	1	0.153
Abilities	1.063	1	0.303
Values	0.520	1	0.471
Identity	4.094	1	0.043
Meaning	3.859	1	0.049

On the basis of the Kruskal-Wallis Test, it was determined that there is no significant difference between general and special education teachers in four dimensions, which are related to the *environment* ( $p = 0.561$ ), *conduct* ( $p = 0.153$ ), *abilities* ( $p = 0.303$ ) and *values* ( $p = 0.471$ ) of teamwork. A significant difference between general and special education teachers occurs in two dimensions, those being the dimensions of *identity* ( $p = 0.043$ ) and *meaning* ( $p = 0.049$ ) of the teamwork. The dimension of teamwork that is related to *identity* indicates that general education teachers in inclusive education conditions have problems: harmonizing personal with common goals, with individual development, distributing tasks and roles in teamwork, in working with children with developmental disabilities, respecting different abilities and talents, and tolerating diversity.

The next dimension related to the *meaning* of teamwork determines problems in teamwork development, conforming personal and team visions, joint contribution, interrelations influence, teamwork significance in a broader social sense, and the benefits of teamwork outside the institution.

#### Socio-demographic indicators

The socio-demographic indicators and general and special education teachers' relation towards teamwork are given in Table 4.

**Table 4**

Socio-demographic indicators	Teamwork dimensions	<i>H</i>	df	<i>p</i>
a) GENDER	Environment	1.693	1	0.193
	Conduct	0.203	1	0.652
	Abilities	0.175	1	0.676
	Values	0.011	1	0.915
	Identity	1.644	1	0.200
	Meaning	0.075	1	0.784
	Environment	2.193	1	0.139
b) SOCIO-CULTURAL MILIEU	Conduct	0.842	1	0.359
	Abilities	0.777	1	0.378
	Values	5.716	1	0.017
	Identity	1.546	1	0.214
	Meaning	6.876	1	0.009
c) AGE GROUP	Environment	8.121	1	0.017
	Conduct	0.954	1	0.621
	Abilities	2.047	1	0.359
	Values	1.621	1	0.445
	Identity	5.073	1	0.079
	Meaning	6.119	1	0.047
	Environment	4.533	1	0.033
d) EDUCATIONAL LEVEL	Conduct	0.134	1	0.715
	Abilities	0.000	1	0.991
	Values	3.355	1	0.067
	Identity	0.049	1	0.824
	Meaning	0.181	1	0.671
	Environment	8.928	1	0.030
	Conduct	0.461	1	0.927
e) WORK EXPERIENCE	Abilities	1.183	1	0.757
	Values	0.268	1	0.966
	Identity	5.860	1	0.119
	Meaning	8.518	1	0.036

### *Gender*

The participants of both genders have similar attitudes towards the examined dimensions of teamwork (see (a) in Table 4). All participants, regardless of gender, have similar standings concerning teamwork ( $p = 0.872$ ). Such a result was expected because it was not possible to equalize the sample according to gender due to the fact that most members of the teaching profession are female.

### *Socio-cultural milieu*

A school's culture simply reflects what its members collectively value and believe about the world and their place in it (Schein, 1985; Weeks, 2012:1).



The examination of the socio-cultural milieu of elementary schools established that the participants from larger school environments and from smaller school environments differ from each other in the dimension of *value* of teamwork ( $p = 0.017$ ). The difference is reflected in the fact that the participants from smaller school environments have greater respect for the team members' autonomy, resolve their conflicts more easily, they are interconnected, make more efforts to learn from each other, exchange opinions, follow or assume the leadership role, share mutual beliefs and respect teamwork more than the participants from larger schools.

The *meaning* of teamwork is the next dimension where the participants from larger and smaller school environments differ from each other ( $p = 0.009$ ). It indicates that the participants from smaller environments harmonize personal and team vision easier, perceive the significance of teamwork in a broader social sense and benefit from teamwork outside the institution (see (b) in Table 4).

#### *Age group*

Through further analysis of Table 4 it was determined that in the dimension *environment* ( $p = 0.017$ ), the oldest participants (aged 46–60) that are in the phase of stable and established positions have the least problems, are aware of their and other people's roles and relations within the team (they are familiar with the group work method, are aware of the role within the team, are aware of the quality of relations with associates outside the team, present their ideas with more confidence and easily communicate in joint meetings). Younger participants are the least content within this domain, which is understandable because of their inexperience, insufficient knowledge of group work methods, unclear role within the team and potential insecurity in presenting their ideas (see (c) in Table 4).

There is no significant difference between the participants of different age groups in the remaining dimensions of teamwork.

#### *Educational level*

The participants' educational level influences only the first dimension of teamwork – *environment* ( $p = 0.033$ ), where the participants with basic academic studies (bachelor's degree) differ from the participants with a Masters' level qualification in the way that they impact the changes in the environment, knowledge of group work methods, awareness of the role within the team, awareness of the quality of relations with associates outside the team, presentation of their ideas, communication in joint meetings, and organization of the team meetings. We assume that the participants' higher educational level provides higher security, knowledge, and flexibility within the team and facilitates their activity within the team (see (d) in Table 4).

#### *Work experience*

The length of work experience leads to difference among the participants in two dimensions – *environment* ( $p = 0.030$ ) and *meaning* ( $p = 0.036$ ) of teamwork. In the

dimension of teamwork related to *environment* the participants with the longest work experience (more than 25 years) differ the most, while in the dimension of *meaning* of teamwork the participants with work experience from 15 to 25 years are singled out (see (e) in Table 4).

## **Discussion**

The widespread practice of including students with developmental difficulties into regular educational classrooms has increased general and special education teachers' expectations and instigated discussions, debates, and structural changes in the preparation of educational plans and programmes/curricula (for example, Hodgson, Lazarus & Thurlow, 2011; Fisher, Frey & Thousand, 2003; Stayton & McCollum, 2002). One of the ways in which general teachers fulfill the needs of children with disabilities is by means of developing collaborative relations with special education teachers (Hang & Rabren, 2009; McDuffie, Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2009; Winn & Blanton, 2005). General and special education teachers are often reminded of the fact that teamwork is essential for the successful inclusion of students with disability and an integral part of the effort to improve the work in an inclusive school (O'Keefe & Haney, 1999; Patchell & Treloar, 1999).

Winn & Blanton (2005:1) have summarized the need for growing collaboration and teamwork of general and special education teachers in the following manner,

“As the number of students with developmental difficulties in regular schools increases, so does the need for knowledge and skills of general and special education teachers, who have to create a joint strategy, vision and skill base in order to educate all students successfully.”

In our research, the value of a global score according to categories indicates that there is no significant difference in the perception of teamwork among general and special education teachers. The efficiency of teamwork depends on the extent to which general and special education teachers believe that they have the necessary competencies and how they perceive the effects of teamwork. Those who look upon teamwork as a valuable endeavour invest more effort to support their team than those who look upon teamwork with negativity (Slonski-Fowler & Truscott, 2004; Yoshida, Fenton, Kaufman & Maxwell, 1978).

Further statistical analysis established that general and special education teachers are aware of the environment within which teamwork functions; also they are of similar conduct, abilities and respect. They further the same values of teamwork. However, statistically significant differences between general and special education teachers occur in the dimension of identity and meaning of teamwork in an inclusive school. This implicates the existence of a problem within the teaching profession regarding identity, the meaning of interrelations with special educators in order to improve the work in an inclusive classroom, experience of the significance of teamwork in a broader social sense, and benefits of teamwork outside the institution.

General educators play a primary role in the education of students with disabilities, and often they report feeling unprepared to undertake this role. They have problems in co-planning and co-teaching, in understanding the different roles and areas of expertise, time management, shared responsibility for celebrating success and analyzing failure, and clarity and precision in communication with a special education teacher (Brownell, Adams, Sindelar, Waldron & Vanhover, 2006).

Without the skills to enter a professional dialogue with one another, special and general education teachers have often found themselves in opposition to one another. After experiencing the move to an in-class model of student support, one regular class teacher remarked:

"I used to hate it in those days when you took the children out of my class. I never knew what you were doing with them and I felt I would look stupid if I asked. I thought what I was teaching was important, but I never knew how to tell you that."

Little did she know how difficult it also was for the special education teacher to enter hostile territory in order to retrieve a child for his scheduled pull-out time. Although the general teacher may possess more knowledge and experience in his work with a larger number of students and better knowledge of certain teaching contents, the special education teacher has specialized skills, and knows learning styles and the manner in which to adapt teaching material according to the abilities of individual students. The principal should help these two types of teacher so that each expert can identify his own strengths and find a way to support each other. They should be encouraged to exchange ideas in the process of planning training units and implementation of teaching (De Boera, Pijlb & Minnaerta, 2011; Van der Mescht & Tyala, 2008; Hines, 2008).

Previous research confirms that the general education teachers are faced with difficulties in their endeavors to create a difference in approach between students with disabilities and students of typical population; obviously they need the assistance of special education teachers to create the difference in training where all students are involved in (Hodgson, McCulloch & Fox, 2011).

The issue of the identity of the general teacher's profession is also reflected in the diverse abilities and talents of all students, as well as students with disabilities in an inclusive classroom (Blanton, 1992; Brantlinger, 1996). Although the tolerance for diversity is the foundation for voluntary support of inclusive practice, it may make more sense if it is focused on the development of skills and/or competences essential for the support of students in the inclusive classroom through permanent learning and individual general teachers' development (Jenkins, Pateman & Black, 2002; Pugach, 1996). The new way of working requires a new organization, material support, training, motivation, job satisfaction and professional growth of teachers for that type of work (Strydom, Nortjé, Beukes, Esterhuysen & Van der Westhuizen, 2012).

General and special education teachers, regardless of their age and work experi-

ence, have similar conducts, abilities, system of values and identity within the profession. The only dimensions in which the difference between participants of diverse age groups occurs are *environment* and *meaning* of teamwork. Unlike the younger colleagues, the older group of participants (aged 46–60) with longer work experience (over 15 years) adapt to environmental changes easier, are more familiar with group work methods, more aware of their role within the team, have quality of relations with their associates outside the team, present their ideas easily, communicate in joint meetings, harmonize personal and team visions and comprehend the impact of inter-relations on the teamwork.

The higher educational level, better theoretical and practical foundation facilitates general and special education teachers' ability to adapt to the *environment*, which requires teamwork.

By examining the socio-cultural milieu of elementary schools in larger and smaller schools, we wanted to establish what kind of beliefs, norms, and values the participants upheld in their teamwork. The research results indicate that general and special education teachers from larger and smaller schools uphold diverse values of teamwork. Respectively, general and special education teachers from smaller schools exhibit higher cohesiveness than their colleagues from larger schools, for example, they feel they belong and are happy to work together. The crucial values that support/encourage cohesion are trust, openness, willingness for cooperation and participation in teamwork in inclusive schools (Joseph & Winston, 2005; Van der Mescht & Tyala, 2008).

Values that are developed by one school are motivation instigators for the teachers and other members of the school staff, which are very much thought about; the director's task is to perceive the importance of values in the school, to create a plan for the school's cultural development and to instigate the team members to implement it. It should be emphasized that values differ from vision. The accepted vision is realized by teachers individually and within groups, and values are manifested as shared similar behaviours, symbols in a group system and not as a group of individuals. Values give a sense of identity – vision gives a sense of purposefulness. Together they are an initiating pair. In order for teachers and directors to transform a school according to their vision, they have to transform themselves at the same time (Thousand, Villa & Nevin, 2006).

## **Conclusion**

With the development of various models (co-teaching, resource room, consultation model, itinerant teacher) of inclusive education, the issue of teamwork of every expert in the school arises, and especially with regard to general and special education teachers. On the basis of the obtained results, we have established that there is no significant difference between general and special education teachers in their perception of four out of six dimensions of teamwork. They are aware of the environment within

which teamwork functions, are of similar conduct and abilities, and respect the same values of teamwork. The transition from traditional to inclusive education brings with it the problems of identity within the general education teacher's profession, meaning of interrelations with special education teachers, significance of teamwork in the broader social sense, and benefits of teamwork outside the institution.

Socio-demographic indicators demonstrate that general and special education teachers' gender is not determined by their relation towards teamwork. However, the age group, work experience, educational level, and socio-cultural milieu of a school lead to the difference in relation of general and social education teachers towards one to two dimensions of teamwork (environment and meaning of teamwork).

The research results raise a series of issues that are related to the improvement of the team relations of a heterogeneous group of experts, clarification of hidden and unspoken elements of relations that influence the satisfaction, and success at work of experts as well as children educated in an inclusive school. The assessment of different dimensions of teamwork can enable evaluation of the functioning of all team members of a school, not only special and general education teachers. The continuous evaluation of teamwork enables the school manager to reduce exposure to professional stress and to develop strategies that support collaborative relations among team members by means of good organization, support, and education.

## Note

- 1 This work was created within the project Creation of the protocol for evaluation of education potentials of children with developmental disabilities as criteria for creation of individual educational programmes; the project holder is the Ministry for Science and Technological Development, Belgrade, decree No. 179025.

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