

Institute for Educational Research, Belgrade, Serbia

29th International Scientific Conference
“Educational Research and School Practice”

**TOWARDS A MORE
EQUITABLE EDUCATION:
FROM RESEARCH TO CHANGE**

BOOK OF PROCEEDINGS

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December 1st, 2023

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Note. This book was funded by the Ministry of Science, Technological Development, and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia (Contract No. 451-03-47/2023-01/ 200018).

.....
 CIP - Каталогизacija y публикацији
 Народна библиотека Србије, Београд

37.014.1(082)
 37.091(082)
 371.13(082)
 37.091.33(082)

INTERNATIONAL Scientific Conference "Educational Research and School Practice" (29 ; 2023 ; Beograd)

Towards a more equitable education: from research to change : book of proceedings / 29th International Scientific Conference "Educational Research and School Practice", December 1st, 2023. ; editors Mladen Radulović, Marija Trajković. - Belgrade : Institute for Educational Research, 2023 ([Beograd] : Kuća štampe). - 199 str. : table ; 24 cm

Tiraž 100. - Napomene i bibliografske reference uz tekst. - Bibliografija uz svaki rad. - Registar.

ISBN 978-86-7447-165-4

a) Право на образовање -- Зборници б) Школство -- Реформа -- Зборници в) Наставници -- Стручно усавршавање -
 - Зборници г) Настава -- Иновације -- Зборници д) Инклузивно образовање -- Зборници

COBISS.SR-ID 130997001

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THE APPLICATION OF SOCIOMETRIC TECHNIQUES IN RESEARCH ON PEER RELATIONS IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION¹

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The application of sociometric techniques is commonplace in research on social relations between students included in a model of inclusive education and their peers. Since the acceptance of children with developmental disabilities is a crucial prerequisite to a more equitable education, this paper aims to explore the advantages and shortcomings of the application of sociometric techniques, which are most commonly associated with the positivist paradigm in the study of contemporary pedagogical concepts such as inclusion.

With the use of sociometric techniques, researchers can shed light on the social status of students with developmental disabilities and the level of their social acceptance by their classmates. Sociometric techniques can be used to study different aspects of peer relations, allowing for the exploration of peer learning, socializing, play, and emotional relationships (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003). Aiming to explain the sociometric status of students with developmental disabilities, researchers have focused on links between students' sociometric status and some of their personal characteristics, including but not limited to socio-behavioral characteristics (Banković, 2018; Frostad & Pijl, 2007; Garrote, 2017), academic achievement (Vujačić & Đević, 2022), and the type of developmental disability (Maksimović, 2004). Studies have also linked the sociometric status of students with developmental disabilities to certain characteristics of the environment, such as the cultural capital of students' families (Vujačić & Đević, 2022), peer attitudes and beliefs (Mamas et al., 2019; Petry, 2018), and teaching strategies (Fuchs et al., 2002).

1 *Note.* This research was funded by the Ministry of Science, Technological Development, and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia (contract no. 451-03-47/2023-01/ 200018).

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While researchers worldwide have long used sociometric techniques to study the social status of students with developmental disabilities who attend regular schools, researchers in our country have rarely included these techniques in their research designs. However, several domestic studies examining this issue have relied on sociometric techniques (Banković, 2016; Đević, 2015; Jablan et al., 2017; Maksimović, 2004, Vujačić & Đević, 2022). The results of these studies are in line with the findings of research conducted in other parts of the world and indicate that numerous students with developmental disabilities are either ignored or rejected by their classmates in regular schools (Frostad & Pijl, 2007; Koster et al., 2010; Walker & Nabuzoka, 2007). However, it should be emphasized that this does not hold true for the entire population of students with developmental disabilities. Indeed, research has revealed variations in the social experiences of students with developmental disabilities in regular schools, indicating that not all members of this population have poor social relations with their peers (Avramidis, 2010).

Analyzing empirical research on the social status of students with developmental disabilities, we identified peer nomination as the most commonly used technique (Banković, 2018; Đević, 2015; Frostad & Pijl, 2007; Jablan et al., 2017; Koster et al., 2010; Vujačić & Đević, 2022; Walker & Nabuzoka, 2007), followed by peer ranking (Đević, 2015; Koster et al., 2010; Vujačić & Đević, 2022). In the case of the peer nomination technique, students are expected to nominate their peers based on a specific sociometric criterion, such as play and socializing. Nominations can be positive, with students asked to name peers with whom they would like to engage in the given activity, or negative, with students asked to name peers with whom they would not like to engage in the proposed activity (Child & Nind, 2013). Positive nominations are used to calculate the peer acceptance score, while negative nominations serve to calculate the peer rejection score (Ilić, 2013). The number of nominations can be limited (usually to three nominations) or unlimited (Terry, 2000). According to Avramidis, one of the main limitations of this technique lies in the fact that when the number of nominations is limited, students with developmental disabilities can remain unnominated. Thus, their status in the peer group remains unclear. Furthermore, with peer nominations, students can be labeled as rejected based on the number of nominations received from their peers, despite having close social relationships with several students in the class (Avramidis et al., 2017). Likewise, there are certain ethical issues associated with the use of negative

peer nominations (Avramidis, 2010; Mayeux et al., 2007; Child & Nind, 2013; Krnjajić, 2007). A common belief among researchers is that negative statements about other children can magnify students' sense of loneliness, reinforce negative interactions and negative attitudes towards rejected children, cause participants to show resistance, and affect participants' honesty (Krnjajić, 2007). However, research focusing on the ethical issues associated with the application of sociometric techniques and the well-being of students after research has shown that studies relying on sociometric techniques do not significantly affect student behavior and that students do not experience any negative feelings as a result of research participation (Mayeux et al., 2007). Still, these findings do not pertain to peer relations in the context of inclusive education.

On the other hand, the application of the peer ranking technique tends to yield more information on the social status of each individual student. In the application of this technique, students are expected to use a three-point or five-point Likert-type rating scale (Jiang & Cillessen, 2005) to indicate the degree to which they would be inclined to participate in the joint activity defined by a sociometric criterion with each of their classmates (Krnjajić, 2002). The mean value of the peer ratings a student receives reflects the level of the student's social acceptance within the group (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003). Research on the social status of students with developmental disabilities has commonly combined peer nominations with the peer ranking technique (Koster et al., 2010; Vujačić & Đerić, 2002; Wauters & Knoors, 2008) to ensure the obtainment of the desired data on the social status of students with developmental disabilities. On the other hand, the peer ranking technique constitutes a good alternative to negative peer nominations in terms of avoiding potential negative effects on the well-being of students who participate in the research (Child & Nind, 2013). However, it should be emphasized that there are also certain ethical dilemmas regarding the use of the peer ranking technique. For instance, there is the question of the degree to which student responses are shaped by the dominant prejudices in society, which further raises the question of whether asking students to rank their peers based on a criterion can lead to the reinforcement of these prejudices (Child & Nind, 2013). In line with the ethical issues associated with negative peer nominations, Avramidis warns that situations in which students are asked to rank their peers based on a criterion can indirectly evoke unspoken negative perceptions of peers, which could affect subsequent peer interactions within the group (Avramidis, 2010).

The application of sociometric techniques yields valuable data on the social status of students with developmental disabilities. However, these techniques cannot illuminate the causes and consequences of students' social status, nor can they offer a deeper insight into the structure and nature of relations in classrooms with students with developmental disabilities. To avoid the tendency towards merely categorizing students and ensure greater sensitivity to the environment in which social relations are established, it is necessary to combine quantitative and qualitative methods, employ diverse research instruments, and involve all key actors (Vujačić & Đević, 2022).

Despite the aforementioned shortcomings, the application of sociometric techniques in research on peer relations in inclusive education yields findings that can be of use not only to researchers, but also to education policymakers, teachers, school counselors, parents, and other actors in education. Sociometric techniques can be particularly useful to teachers and since they are not difficult to use, teachers can easily employ them in their classrooms. Thus, they can gain a better understanding of the social status of each student and help improve social relations between students in a class. It should be noted that the inclusive orientation of our school system is characterized by the tendency to enroll an increasing number of students with developmental disabilities in regular schools. Having in mind the potential negative effects of peer rejection, it is necessary to use the existing findings to inform and implement proactive measures and enrich the teaching practice with strategies that can help improve peer relations among students (Banković, 2016).

Keywords: students with developmental disabilities, peer relations, sociometric research, the peer nomination technique, the peer ranking technique

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“Educational Research and School Practice“*

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Publisher

Institute for Educational Research

For the publisher

Nikoleta GUTVAJN

Editors

Mladen RADULOVIĆ

Marija TRAJKOVIĆ

Proofreader

Aleksandra ILIĆ

Copy Editor

Marija TRAJKOVIĆ

Print run

100

Cover design / Graphic processing

Branko CVETIĆ

Printed by

Kuća štampe plus
stampanje.com

<https://www.ipisr.org.rs/images/pdf/towards-a-more-equitable-education.pdf>

ISBN 978-86-7447-165-4

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