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# **Perspectives of Pupils with Additional Support Needs and Their Parents on the Learning Support during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Croatia**

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## **Disclosure of conflict of interest**

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

## **Ethics and integrity policy statement**

The research received authorisation from the Croatian Ministry of Science and Education and the approval of the Ethics Committee of the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb (no. 03/2021).

## **Data availability statement**

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

# **Perspectives of Pupils with Additional Support Needs and Their Parents on the Learning Support during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Croatia**

## **Abstract**

The concept of inclusive education is well established in policy documents worldwide, but its implementation for pupils with additional support needs (ASN) still raises questions. The challenges of educating pupils with ASN increased significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic due to changes in organisation of the teaching and learning process and the heightened need for support. To gain in-depth insights into the experiences of upper secondary school pupils with ASN and their parents, an exploratory, phenomenological study of the perspectives of pupils and parents was conducted within the Croatian educational system. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 pupils with individualised educational programmes (IEPs) along with their parents. The data were analysed through reflexive thematic analysis. Three participant profiles that differed in regard to the perception of stability/change of learning support during the pandemic were generated and described. The dominant perspective included the perception of consistently low teacher support during the pandemic, which arises from insufficient recognition of pupils' needs, reactive stance and placing responsibility for school success on pupils. The perception of intensified parental support was evident in some accounts of both parents and pupils, but the pupils' explicit invitation stood out as a key factor in the activation of parents.

**Keywords:** Additional support needs, COVID-19 pandemic, upper secondary school pupils, parents, semi-structured interviews, support for learning

## **Key points**

- The challenges of educating upper secondary school pupils with ASN increased significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Croatia represents an interesting case for the exploration of educational experiences of pupils with ASN and their parents due to fewer days in remote teaching and learning during the pandemic in comparison to other European countries
- The dominant perspective of pupils with ASN included the perception of consistently low teacher support, which arises from their insufficient recognition of pupils' needs, reactive stance and placing responsibility for school success on pupils.
- Parental support for learning during the pandemic depended on pupils' explicit invitation. Intensification and diversification of parental roles was evident when the children were struggling to meet the educational demands and the schools were not responding adequately to pupils' needs.

## **Introduction**

The inclusive education model, as a concept of creating an environment in which all pupils have a chance to learn and develop their potentials, is well described in numerous international policy documents and supported in various educational systems for decades now (Salamanca Statement, 1994; UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006). Most European countries implement inclusive education model and recognise additional support needs (ASN) in regard to diverse pupil groups and, in particular, pupils with disabilities, learning difficulties and disadvantages (OECD, 2004; European Commission, 2019). Despite all the legislation and policies for inclusive education, ensuring reasonable adjustments for pupils with ASN still represents one of the biggest global challenges of education. The prevalence rates for pupils with ASN in school-age population range from 3% to 7% (even up to 17.4%) and is currently rising (Wagner et al., 2021). The provision of learning support defined in pupils' individualised educational programmes (IEPs) is challenging even in "normal" times, but the COVID-19 pandemic has initiated significant changes in teaching and learning and brought new demands (WHO, 2020). The sudden switch to remote and blended models of teaching and learning demanded increased support from teachers and greater involvement of parents (Chen et al., 2022; Sanderson & Rojas, 2023). It is clear now that the COVID-19 pandemic affected vulnerable populations, such as pupils with ASN, more severely than their neurotypical peers (Berasategi Sancho et al., 2021; Castro-Kemp & Mahmud, 2021; Columbo & Santagati, 2022; Crawley et al., 2021; Parmigiani et al., 2020). Pandemic-induced changes in the organisation of the schooling led to heightening barriers to access to learning and raised difficulties faced by pupils with ASN in terms of equitable participation in the education process and coping with the challenges of learning in new circumstances.

By employing qualitative research method, this paper aims to provide deeper insights into the experiences and perspectives of pupils with ASN along with their parents during pandemic-induced changes in the process of schooling in Croatia. Croatia represents a country case where effective, high quality inclusive education is envisioned as an educational goal for every pupil with ASN on all educational levels but is facing significant challenges in its everyday implementation. During the pandemic, Croatian schools were fully shut for eight weeks, which makes Croatia one of the European countries with the shortest period of school closure (UNESCO, 2022) and an interesting case for exploring the perspectives and experiences of schooling in the school premises under epidemiological measures combined with the shorter periods of remote teaching and learning.

### ***Schooling of pupils with additional support needs in Croatia's education system***

According to Croatian legislation, pupils with ASN are those who cannot participate fully, efficiently and equitably in the education process due to physical, mental, cognitive and/or sensory issues (Act on Primary and Secondary Education of Pupils with Developmental Disabilities; Official Gazette 24/2015).

The most common programme for pupils with ASN provided in a mainstream educational setting is Individualised approach to teaching and learning with no adjustment to the content, intended for diverse groups of pupils who have average intellectual abilities but difficulties in one or more developmental domains (attention, reading, writing, calculating and communication). In Croatia, as in some other countries, this kind of IEP serves pupils with a specific learning disorder (dyslexia, dyscalculia or dysgraphia), pupils with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and those on the autism spectrum disorder or a combination of more than one of these (Croatian Institute of Public Health, 2019; European Commission, 2019; Cook & Ogden, 2021). It does not include any changes in the content of the curriculum, but the core adjustments are focused on the instruction, assessment, teaching materials and pace of learning (Guidelines on the Process of Individual Education Plan, 2021)<sup>1</sup>. For example, easy language is used, teaching materials are adjusted in terms of implementing readable font, changing font size to 12–14 points or equivalent, using colours and aligning text to the left, and different types of visual support are used (Lenček & Kuvač Kraljević, 2016; Lenček, Kuvač Kraljević & Jozipović, 2022). The IEP is created for a particular pupil with ASN, and specifies adjustments and individual targets during each year of his/her primary, lower and upper secondary education. In Croatia, upper-secondary education is differentiated and organised in three streams (general - gymnasia, vocational with access to the tertiary level and vocational with no access to the tertiary level) and more than 300 specific educational programmes. Depending on their abilities and interests, pupils with ASN could access all three streams, but are mostly enrolled to vocational streams which are generally less prestigious than general stream.

Monitoring of the provision of IEPs in Croatian schools show that the process of implementation of IEP is very challenging (Sekušak-Galešev, Stančić & Igrić, 2015; Ožbolt & Ivšac Pavliša, 2022). As specific adjustments are provided inconsistently between different schools, and even within the same school, many experts refer to the IEP as a “dead letter”. The sudden emergence of COVID-19 pandemic further increased these challenges.

### ***Challenges of schooling for pupils with ASN during the COVID-19 pandemic***

Research in various educational contexts showed that school closures and changes in the organisation of teaching and learning process has been particularly challenging for pupils with ASN, who are more likely to face additional barriers in learning and suffer from being deprived of physical learning opportunities and previously established support measures from teachers and other professional staff (e.g. Berasategi Sancho et al., 2021; Castro-Kemp & Mahmud, 2021; Columbo & Santagati, 2022; Crawley et al., 2021; Parmigiani et al., 2020). Studies examining parental perspectives of the impact of school closure during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that the changes due to COVID-19

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<sup>1</sup> Another type of IEP present in mainstream schooling is individualised approach to teaching with adjustments to the content of the curriculum which is designed for pupils with intellectual disabilities.

demanded greater engagement from the parents (e.g. Catro-Kemp & Mahmud, 2021; Neece et al., 2020; Putri et al., 2020), but also greater socioemotional support because of the documented consequences of school closure on children's mental health and socialization (Crawley et al., 2020; Idoiaga Mondragon et al., 2021). A study conducted by the British Dyslexia Association (2022) revealed that during remote learning, parents had a chance to experience the specific challenges of their children in accessing the curriculum. Pupils with dyslexia who stayed without the usual type of support could not meet the educational demands on a daily basis (British Dyslexia Association, 2022). The pace of work, especially during remote teaching and learning, was too demanding for the pupils and they fell further behind in learning. In another study, the parents of pupils with ASN reported on the outburst of problem behaviours and the increase of anxiety levels as a result of significantly changed everyday routines (Genova, Arora & Botticello, 2021). The studies also pointed to the observation that the support provided to families during COVID-19 was diverse, even within the same educational system. In the study of Toseeb et al. (2020), up to 40% parents found school support during pandemics inadequate for their children's needs, while in Chen et al. (2022) the half of the pupils experienced a reduction in IEP service provision and their parents were "forced" to take the role of surrogate teachers or therapists. In Croatia, parents of pupils with ASN in elementary schools were highly engaged in supporting children's learning and assisting them with homework during the pandemic (Lenček, Vuk & Ivšac Pavliša, 2022).

### ***Present study***

Several research gaps were identified in the literature that we tried to address with this study. First, qualitative studies exploring the experiences and perspectives of pupils with ASN and their parents are generally missing (Cook & Ogden, 2021). In addition, there is a lack of in-depth research during the pandemic that could inform us about school experiences of pupils with ASN (compared with the experiences of typical pupils) and the ways in which these pupils adapted to the changes in the organisation of the teaching and learning process. Finally, the upper secondary educational level was rarely the focus of the exploration of the perspectives of pupils and parents during the pandemic, probably due to the expectation that the greatest disturbances in the process of teaching and learning were present during the pandemic in relation to lower educational cycles.

Through an explorative qualitative approach and semi-structured interviews with pupils with ASN and their parents, this study tries to compensate for these gaps and enable in-depth insight into their educational experiences and perspectives on learning support when faced with two years of disruption in the regular teaching and learning. Using a sample of upper secondary school pupils with ASN and their parents, the study provides a unique insight into the perspectives of the group, which is currently underrepresented in the literature. The research findings might serve as an input for creating better inclusive practices and policies within the Croatian educational system but also for other systems that nourish inclusive education, but are struggling with its implementation.

In line with above, the following research objectives were formulated:

- (1) to explore how upper secondary school pupils with ASN and their parents experienced pandemic-induced changes in schooling and in support for learning provided by teachers; and
- (2) to gain insights into parents' and pupils' perspectives on parents' engagement and support for learning during the pandemic.

## **Methods**

The study<sup>2</sup> employed a qualitative research methodology for an in-depth exploration of pupils' and parents' perspectives on the support for learning received from teachers and parents during the pandemic. It involves studying multiple cases of pupil–parent dyads in an explorative and descriptive manner with the aim of providing insights into commonalities and variations in the experiences and perceptions and identifying significant themes and patterns within and across these cases. The study uses the phenomenological approach, which allows us to explore diverse perspectives and to develop a description of the “essence” of the lived experiences of pupils and parents in the contexts and timeframe in which these experiences occur (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## ***Participants***

Following authorisation from the Croatian Ministry of Science and Education and approval of the Ethics Committee of the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb (no. 03/2021), we recruited and interviewed 12 dyads of upper secondary school pupils with ASN, along with their parents, from schools operating in various locations in the Republic of Croatia. Selected schools represented the subsample of schools participating in the quantitative part of the entire research project and were chosen with the idea of maximum variation in terms of school location (region), size of the settlement and school type (general/vocational/mixed school). From each of the 12 participating schools, only one dyad consisting of pupils with learning disabilities or difficulties and their parents participated in the study. Pupils were

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<sup>2</sup> This paper presents the results of a study included in the mixed model research project “Changes in the Organization of the Educational Process caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic: Effects on Educational Experiences, Well-being and Aspirations of Pupils in Croatia” financed by the Croatian Science Foundation and the Ministry of Science and Education. This mixed method research project focused on the exploration of the effects on pandemic on well-being and educational experiences of pupils and teachers in Croatian elementary and upper secondary schools.

The qualitative phase of the whole research project aimed at the exploration of experiences and perspectives of three vulnerable groups of pupils in lower secondary and upper secondary education: pupils with disabilities, pupils from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and gifted pupils. The qualitative research phase included interviews with triads consisting of pupil–parent–teacher in elementary and upper secondary schools. In each school, three triads were interviewed (one related to each vulnerable pupil group). For the purposes of this paper, only results from upper secondary school pupils with disabilities were taken into account.

selected by their teachers, in collaboration with the researchers, using the following pre-established criteria: a) possession of formal Individual Educational Programme issued by the local authorities (individualisation of teaching and learning process with no reduction of subject contents or adjustment of outcomes) and b) falling into the following category of disability/difficulty, as defined in the national Act on Primary and Secondary Education of Pupils with Developmental Disabilities (Official Gazette 24/2015): subcategories of reading difficulties, writing difficulties, difficulties with maths or mixed learning difficulties (under the category of specific learning difficulties) or subcategories of mental disorders of attention (under the category of behavioural and mental health difficulties). Applied inclusion criteria enabled capturing some of the range and diversity of the experiences of upper secondary pupils with ASN during the pandemic, while also allowing for the selection of cases that were relatively easy to access by the researchers and were willing to participate. The parents of the selected pupils were invited to participate in the study through an invitation letter written by the research team and an invitation by the teacher. No formal criteria were established for the selection of pupils' parents; that is, families decided independently who, out of two parents (if present), would participate in the study.

The goal of the applied sampling strategy was to include diverse sources that could shed light on the variations in the experiences of education for pupils with ASN during the pandemic from pupils' and parents' perspectives. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

In total, 12 interviews with pupils and 12 interviews with parents were conducted. A description of the sample is provided in Table 1.

#### INSERT TABLE 1

### ***Measures and methods***

Semi-structured interviews with pupils and parents were conducted at the end of the 2021/22 school year (spring 2022), when the school measures related to the pandemic had already been relaxed. Most of the interviews took place face to face on the school's premises, but a few interviews with parents were conducted through online platforms. Interviews were conducted individually with each participant, based on interview guides. Both authors were involved in the construction of the interview guides and the data collection. The interview guide for pupils was designed to offer insights into their experiences of school, out-of-school and family life during the two school years affected by the pandemic (2020/21 and 2021/22), while the interview guide for parents was intended for collecting parents' reflections on their children's experiences during the same period and their experiences of providing support for their children's learning. The topics discussed in the interviews were similar for pupils and parents and included the following: perception of the organisation of teaching and learning process during remote teaching and teaching in school under epidemiological measures, views on adjustments of the teaching and learning process for the child and additional activities of teachers and non-teaching staff intended



for the provision of individualised support for the child, satisfaction with teachers' support, comparison with pre-pandemic times, perception of parental support for learning during the pandemic and satisfaction with parental support. The questions were open-ended, conversational and allowed for further exploration of some emerging topics relevant for the participants. Interviews with pupils were, on average, 20 minutes in duration, while interviews with parents lasted between 20 and 45 minutes. Immediately after the interview, the researchers took notes on their observations and impressions of how each participant approached the interview and framed his/her experience.

### *Analysis*

The coding of interview data and data analysis was conducted in line with the guidelines by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2022) for using reflexive thematic analysis.

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The researchers familiarised themselves with the data through multiple readings of transcripts, during which side notes were taken on all interesting points for the analysis. A brief reflexive summary was prepared for each transcript, describing the researcher's initial understanding of the participant's perspectives and links with her own experiences.

The data were further managed using NVivo software. Interview coding was conducted by the authors. Initial codes related to the types of individualised adjustments and support received from teachers and parents were generated mostly deductively, based on a pre-existing analytical frame, while data-driven, bottom-up coding was adopted for the analysis of the perception of stability or change of support from teachers or parents in comparison to the pre-pandemic period. This inductive coding was used due to the need for an exploratory examination of pupils' and parents' experiences during the pandemic, which was viewed as the field that was under-researched and where no theoretical foundation was developed.

The majority of codes were semantic, which means that they reflected the explicit (manifest) meanings that were close to the participants' expressions and their understanding of their own experiences. At the beginning of the coding process, we tried to remain close to the participants' language and name code titles based on the wording they used. As the coding process progressed, we noted some latent codes that sought to look beyond what participants explicitly said, e.g. when we coded things that had actually not been said (code – no mention of pupils' difficulty) or are influenced by social norms (code – stigma about ASN). With such coding, an attempt was made to progress in analysis from the description that represents what participants have said to interpretation that takes into account not only participant experiences and perspectives but also our understandings and reflections about broader meanings and less evident patterns and implications (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). Compatible with the focus on data-driven and semantic-level coding, our approach used experiential orientation to qualitative research that focused on exploring the truths of participants' contextually situated experiences, meanings and realities (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The initial coding of pupil transcripts was done systematically by one researcher, while the coding of parent transcripts was done by another researcher. In the next phase, the researchers agreed to swap participant groups (in an attempt to perform a form of researcher triangulation and secure greater trustworthiness of the findings), and each researcher independently coded three interviews from another group for the purposes of reflexivity. Based on this practice, the researchers engaged in reflexive discussion to reflect on similarities and differences in our perspectives and our approach to coding. Reflexivity included drawing upon our experiences and previous knowledge as researchers in the field of inclusive education but also as mothers of daughters with ASN, with the aim of exploring how our perspectives and understanding resonated with participant positions and influenced the coding process and data interpretation. As a result of systematic coding of all interview transcripts, 43 codes were identified and 361 broad data excerpts were coded.

Next, as we sought to identify themes as patterns of shared meaning, both researchers reviewed all coded excerpts for each individual code and discussed the necessary corrections. In this process, some similar or redundant codes were collated into single ones, while others were separated because they contained divergent elements that did not constitute a coherent pattern of meaning. We proceeded to search for larger patterns across the dataset by sorting and grouping similar codes and considering how codes may combine to form themes. This process involved frequent revisits of the original texts and repeated examination of individual cases as a whole. As we found significant heterogeneity between pupils and between parents, we made contrasts to identify three profiles that differed in regard to the perceived level of support in comparison with pre-pandemic times. We named these three profiles: *consistently low support for learning from teachers/ parents*, *change of support level during pandemic* and *consistently high support for learning from teachers/parents* and described them through two or three generated themes for each profile. The identified themes represented specific patterns of the participants' shared beliefs and ideas about the provision of support for pupils' learning during the pandemic. For both participant groups, generated themes had the same titles, as they reflected commonalities in what pupils and parents' have said, although the content of each theme was not completely the same for these two groups. Themes' titles and contents were refined in several steps that included continuous engagement with the data across all cases and across profiles and reflecting on the themes themselves. We wanted to ensure that our analysis was grounded in the data, so we checked that the generated themes were closely linked to the data and that the selected data excerpts were an "accurate" representation of the essence of each theme. Several provisional thematic maps were prepared, reviewed and refined through the discussion of the researchers to form one coherent and balanced account of the dataset analysed.

The final thematic map that was developed for the purposes of the study is shown in *Figure 1*.

INSERT FIGURE 1

## Results

The results section is divided into two parts. In the first part, we described how upper secondary school pupils with ASN experienced pandemic-induced changes to their schooling and perceived support from teachers during the last two school years, which were characterised by a mix of remote and in-school models of teaching and learning. The exploration of pupils' retrospective accounts of their two-year experiences of schooling during the pandemic was triangulated using the perspectives of their parents, who could contribute their unique position of understanding the child and his/her specific challenges in the schooling process. In the second part, the parents' perspectives and experiences of providing support for learning to their children during the pandemic are presented. Based on these retrospective accounts, we described how the pandemic influenced parents' perceptions of children's needs and changed their at-home involvement. In addition, parents' perspectives were supplemented with pupils' reflection on their parental role during the pandemic in an attempt to develop a more comprehensive and complete understanding of the changes in parental support resulting from the pandemic-induced changes in the organisation of the teaching and learning process.

In both parts of the results section, the experiences of support for learning will be explored through the description of three identified profiles that differed with regard to the perceived level of support in comparison to pre-pandemic times.

### ***Teachers' support and adjustments for pupils during the pandemic from pupils' and parents' perspectives***

#### *Pupils' profile: Perception of consistently low teacher support for learning*

Out of 12 pupil participants, 10 described their experiences of receiving support for learning from teachers during the pandemic as similar to pre-pandemic times. In the view of these participants, teachers' support and adjustments were consistently low, either present in only some subjects or nonexistent altogether. When directly asked about the elements of individualisation during the pandemic, these pupils mostly could not recall any newly introduced type of support or adjustment that would serve them in the periods when teaching and learning were organised remotely or in schools under epidemiological measures. The types of support or adjustment that were the parts of their IEP before the pandemic, such as adjustment of assessment (fewer tasks on school exams, longer time for exams) or adjustment of materials (prepared texts in greater font size), were also present during the pandemic, while no additional support measures were applied. Pupils recalled that during remote teaching and learning, teachers and non-teaching staff (psychologists, pedagogues, speech and language therapists or special education specialists) did not contact them individually or organise individualised consultation or assistance in learning, as evidenced in the following interview excerpt:

*There were no additional activities; every teacher would ask us collectively as if we had any difficulties or if he/she should repeat something. I think everything was the same, except for the*

*fact that the learning was provided remotely. (4<sup>th</sup> grade pupil with mixed learning difficulty, 4-year vocational programme)*

While demonstrating the inability of this pupil to recall the presence of any teachers' activities oriented towards providing individualised support or adjustment, this quotation also signals how pupils typically made comments about teaching and learning process during the pandemic using plural forms. The use of this linguistic form signifies that the pupils believed that teachers treated the class as a whole body and made no differentiation in their teaching. It might also mean that pupils perceived themselves as part of the whole class and no different from others. This was in line with the pupils' observations regarding the non-existence of individualisation of the teaching and learning process, even in normal times when no pandemic-induced changes in the organisation of schooling were in place. In general, the pupils could not elaborate on many elements of their IEPs and gave the impression of not being very knowledgeable about the range of support measures that might be applied in their cases. Out of the above-mentioned adjustment of assessments and materials, which seems to be applied with no specific regard to individual pupils' needs and their difficulty, the introduction of other types of adjustments was mentioned only exceptionally. The following interview excerpt represents the typical response of the pupils regarding the presence of individualisation during the pandemic:

*R: How did the pandemic affect you and your life?*

*P: When we had online school, I didn't quite understand those lessons well. I would understand better in school.*

...

*R: What would you say in terms of how successfully your school organised lectures for pupils during the pandemic?*

*P: Well, they did it OK.*

...

*R: Did your teachers or anyone else from the school do something extra to help you?*

*P: Well, not really.*

*R: Did they ever approach you with something?*

*P: Not really. If I didn't understand what I needed to do, I could ask.*

*R: Did you ever ask a teacher something when it wasn't clear to you?*

*P: Sometimes.*

*R: Did they make any accommodations for you?*

*P: They adjusted the test in some way, but not every teacher. (1<sup>st</sup> grade pupil with dyslexia and dyscalculia, four-year vocational programme)*

Interestingly, the observation of low individualisation of the teaching and learning process during the pandemic (and altogether) did not stir strong emotional reactions or induce expressions of dissatisfaction with school in most pupils belonging to the “consistently low teacher support” profile. We had the impression that these pupils developed low expectations from the educational system in terms of recognising their additional learning needs and providing individualised support, probably in line with their previous experiences, and accepted this state as a continuation of functioning in the usual way. Furthermore, it seems that the pupils did not expect much adjustment and support from the teachers’ side and were satisfied with the mere presence of the opportunity to ask for advice or assistance when needed.

However, the pupils often did not take advantage of the opportunity to ask for teachers’ support during the pandemic and generally did not feel entitled to demand anything special for themselves. From other pupils’ accounts, it was also observable that pupils held themselves accountable for their learning and outcomes and frequently portrayed themselves as pupils who needed no extra help and who were mature enough to assume full responsibility and autonomy in learning. Typical of the developmental phase of adolescence, such self-perception, together with the tendency to not want to stand out of the crowd, was coupled with self-presentation that tried to deny the existence of difficulties and emphasise characteristics relevant for all pupils. The following statement of a pupil from a vocational programme speaks about these tendencies of distancing from personal difficulties and developing the image of a young person who is gaining competence in learning during his upper secondary education:

*Well, I would describe myself as an average pupil. I enjoy the things that most pupils do, you know, hanging out with people of my age, going out. As for school, I think I’m doing decently. I’m good at these vocational subjects. Math and Physics are sometimes a bit challenging, but overall, everything is fine. (2<sup>nd</sup> grade pupil with dyslexia, 4-year vocational programme)*

Similarly, another pupil perceived that she had even “outgrown” her disability and saw no need for any additional support:

*I had an attention deficit disorder, but it has vanished over the years, as I see it. I find that adjustments are no longer necessary for me. (3<sup>rd</sup> grade pupil with attention deficit disorder, 4-year vocational programme)*

Contrary to these dominant perspectives of pupils on “consistently low teacher support”, there were pupils in the same group who voiced their dissatisfaction with the level of teachers’ support during the pandemic and expressed disappointment in the way their IEP was realised. These pupils objected that individualised support was not present in all subjects and that some teachers ignored their rights to the individualisation. The following pupil’s statement illustrates her belief that the school should take more responsibility for informing all subject teachers about the elements of pupils’ IEP and obliging them to comply with the requirements of the IEP. It also demonstrates her strong agency in demanding her rights:

*I had more time to write an exam, which is very good because it is hard to finish exams in shorter time. Yes, some teachers gave me more time on exams and increased font, but other teachers did not know anything about it. I do want teachers to know. What should I do, inform teacher and request adjustments of the exam during the exam? I think that should be the role of the school, to explain the situation to the teachers. (4<sup>th</sup> grade pupil with dyslexia, gymnasium).*

*Pupils' profile: Perception of an increase in teachers' support for learning during the pandemic*

Two pupils belonged to this profile and described their experiences of increased teachers' support and adjustments during the pandemic, especially during the periods of remote teaching. In these two cases, teachers recognised pupils' significant struggles in dealing with new and increased demands related to pandemic-induced changes in teaching and learning and introduced additional measures to help pupils adapt to the new situation and maintain the current level of engagement and performance on school tasks. Increased support included establishing more direct individual contacts with the pupil (and parents likewise), adjusting the learning process (e.g. dividing lectures into small segments, setting later deadlines for homework completion, providing more feedback) and providing emotional support. Non-teaching staff also stepped in and provided assistance and support, as evidenced in the following interview excerpt:

*I talked to our school psychologist about the problems I had at the time. I've just visited her at school. We were her guests every day. When she was not in school, I didn't have anyone to talk to. This was also the same for the other pupils. When we would ask the teachers for help, they would say: "We don't have time." So, I like to spend time with the school psychologist. We talked, and she was helping me with school tasks. (3<sup>rd</sup> grade pupil with mixed learning difficulty, 3-year vocational programme)*

*Pupils' profile: Perception of consistently high teachers' support for learning*

No pupil belonged to this profile.

*Parents' reflections on teachers' support for their children's learning during the pandemic*

Parents learned about teachers' support indirectly, predominantly through discussions with their children and rarely through consultation with teachers. In general, they were not very well informed about newly introduced support measures and specific adjustments. Our impression was that most parents were not aware of all the rights of pupils with ASN in upper secondary education and were not knowledgeable about the measures that could help their children succeed in school. In line with the dominant position of pupils who did not demonstrate agency in asserting their rights for individualisation, the parents in general expressed satisfaction with their cooperation with school and had no major complaints or unmet expectations in regard to the provision of teaching and meeting the needs of their children with ASN. They had a substantial understanding of the difficulties that the schools were experiencing during the challenging period of remote schooling in the organisation of

teaching and learning and in making adjustments for pupils with ASN and claimed that the schools did their best, as evidenced in the following statement:

*I think that the school managed the situation well, keeping in mind the circumstances in which it operated. When the school was online, it all kind of worked as it should, right? Look, they couldn't do it differently. (Mother of a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade pupil with mixed learning disabilities, 3-year vocational programme)*

In contrast, there were some highly engaged parents whose reactions were very bitter and disappointed, as demonstrated by the following statement of the mother who resented that the school did not respond adequately to her son's needs and violated his rights to individualisation:

*They don't have much understanding of him. I'm telling you - he studies at home and tries hard ... but as he is a child with problems, he needs a little help. I'm not asking for any privileges for him, I am not demanding excellent grades.... I'm not satisfied at all. I could single out one or two professors who were cooperative, but most of them did nothing. When something is not clear to him, you have a mother; you have a sister, let them explain it to you. So, what's the point of school? ... He has all the papers, diagnoses from psychologists and speech and language therapists, and instructions on how to work with him... All these papers are for nothing when no one complies and no one meets these children's needs. (Mother of a 1<sup>st</sup> grade pupil with dyslexia and dyscalculia, 4-year vocational programme)*

In relating low teacher support for her child with insufficient recognition of his needs, the words of this mother echoed strong dissatisfaction with and resentment of the teachers' passive stance and pointed to the reasons for her increased engagement.

### ***Parents' support for children's learning during the pandemic from parents' and pupils' perspectives***

#### ***Parents' profile: Consistently low parental support for learning***

Out of 12 parent participants, 8 parents belonged to the profile "consistently low parental support for learning". Typical for their position was that they were not directly involved in their children's learning during the pandemic, although they were active in ensuring the necessary resources and space for learning at the introduction of remote teaching at the beginning of the pandemic. However, they did not actively assist children with their school tasks or provide direct instructions on school subjects on a regular basis. Although they perceived that pandemic-induced changes were challenging for their children in upper secondary schools and called for schools' higher engagement and pupils' greater efforts, these parents chose to stay on the sidelines. Their activation depended on the children's explicit invitations, which means that they did not get involved unless the child was directly asking for help. In fact, typical of these parents was that they constructed their parental role as passive in regard to children's learning and did not feel obliged to be involved, although they were ready to support children in situations when they could not learn independently or solve some specific problem alone. In such

situations, they would decide either to be personally involved or to search for someone else who could help if parents did not possess adequate knowledge and skills or if they were absorbed by other family or work obligations and lacked the time and energy necessary for providing support.

The typical parents' response, stating that the parents got involved only at the child's explicit invitation, is as follows:

*We didn't study a lot together. I let him contact me when he is stuck in something or when something is not clear to him. I didn't interfere with his tasks or obligations.* (Father of a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade pupil with autism spectrum disorder, 3-year vocational programme)

Reacting only to the children's requests for help, these parents communicated to the children that they believed that the parents should hold a back position, while the children were assumed to be responsible for their own successes and failures, as demonstrated in the following statement:

*Well, it might be that I worried too much about all that before (when he was in elementary school). In principle, after all, he is already 18, and I try to let him sort things out for himself alone ... Sometimes I just reminded him of something ... but the school is his responsibility ...* (Mother of 4<sup>th</sup> grade pupils with mixed learning disabilities, art programme)

The above quote, referring to reaching adulthood, emphasises the responsibility of pupils for their own decisions and outcomes while also addressing the changing parental expectations that occur with the developmental changes and transition to a higher educational level. While the parents were highly involved during the early years of their children's schooling, the same level of involvement is no longer considered appropriate when pupils reach upper secondary education. Furthermore, the fact that within upper secondary education, pupils are allocated into specific educational programmes that better suit their abilities and potentials compared to the general programme present in compulsory education makes parental involvement in children's learning less necessary.

In line with the above position that placed primary responsibility for school performance on the child, we observed that parents in this profile mostly overlooked the possibility that their children's difficulties could hinder learning and success on a level equal to that of other pupils who did not have ASN. Actually, when describing their children to the researcher at the start of the interview, these parents omitted mentioning the children's disability/difficulty in the context of schooling but emphasised characteristics such as "being playful", "being lazy" or "not being interested in school subjects" when trying to justify their not-optimal school success. This demonstrates that these parents did not develop a complete understanding of the nature of their children's disability/difficulty and failed to acknowledge that additional support was warranted for equal participation and outcomes.

*Parents' profile: Increased parental support for learning during the pandemic*



Two parents were classified within the profile “increased parental support for learning during the pandemic”. These parents expressed the view that learning during the pandemic, particularly during periods of remote teaching, was much more demanding for their children and that they were struggling to keep up with the requirements of everyday school tasks and could not learn independently. The perception of children’s difficulties in mastering school content has prompted these parents to become more involved in at-home learning and to intensify their engagement in school tasks on a daily basis. On one hand, their decision to increase their engagement was driven by the belief that their involvement in children’s education is an important part of their parenting role and that they had the capacity to help children succeed during this challenging period. On the other hand, it was also conditioned by their assessment that the school support that the child received during the pandemic was insufficient and inadequate for meeting new demands. The following quote illustrates one parent’s recognition of the relationship between the child’s difficulties in meeting the new demands of schooling and the perception of the need for a higher level of involvement during the pandemic. It also shows her understanding of the deficiencies of the education system in providing optimal support for her child and demonstrates her sense of responsibility for the child’s learning. The belief that a mother’s provision of increased support for learning for the child would lead to higher engagement with learning and better academic outcomes for him was also incorporated:

*The whole situation was quite difficult. It’s hard for us even under normal circumstances, but during the pandemic, it was significantly tougher. You see, he’s a young man with a diagnosis of Asperger’s.... In the beginning of pandemic, he couldn’t do it at all, he didn’t know what was expected of him. Understanding things was very challenging for him. During the early stages of the pandemic, luckily it happened that I wasn’t working, so I could help him with everything because I don’t know how he would have managed otherwise. We spent a lot of time together. A lot of time. He had a lot of work.... I think it would have been much, much easier for him if school provided an assistant for him. In reality, I was that assistant right next to him.... I had to explain a lot to him, sometimes repeatedly, the same things all over again. Then it worked.*  
(Mother of a 4<sup>th</sup> grade pupil with autism spectrum disorder, 4-year vocational programme)

Two parents who increased their level of support during the pandemic reported being highly engaged in different tasks, especially during the periods of remote teaching. Most of these tasks included everyday assistance in preparing homework, solving various school tasks, motivating the child and providing emotional support when feeling overwhelmed, anxious or bored. They also comprised providing direct instruction on subject content, which was otherwise a task performed by teachers. Parents reported experiencing substantial difficulties in preparing for this new role, as evidenced by the following statement:

*I had to follow the lectures while he was watching the videos with the teacher who was explaining something. And then I would sit down and learn. I listened to the same lectures*

*because I was not able to explain it to him otherwise. So, I had to first realise how things work, so I could help him.* (Mother of a 4<sup>th</sup> grade pupil with autism spectrum disorder, 4-year vocational programme)

A similar experience of taking on various roles during the pandemic was described succinctly by another mother who also intensified and diversified her parental role during the periods of remote teaching:

*During the online teaching and learning, I became her professor, a pedagogue, a psychologist, and a parent.* (Mother of a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade pupil with attention deficit disorder, 4-year vocational programme)

#### *Parents' profile: Consistently high parental support for learning*

Two parents belonged to the profile “consistently high parental support for learning”. Their beliefs and behaviours regarding providing support for their children’s learning during the pandemic were very similar to the profile of parents who intensified their engagement, but these two parents reported a high level of involvement in their children’s learning even in pre-pandemic times. Typical for these parents was that they had detailed insights into their children’s difficulties and strengths and exhibited high dedication to providing all the support they could, primarily due to their personal sense of duty or feelings of responsibility for their children’s school success. Their constant engagement in children’s learning was related to the observation that their children had substantial difficulties in mastering school content that required consistent and intensive support, as well as adjustments and support from teachers. Even for these parents, their role in supporting children’s learning during the pandemic became diversified, as they had to structure children’s learning from the beginning and provide direct instruction of subject contents, as evidenced in the following quotation of the highly engaged mother, who was completely dissatisfied with the level of support provided by teachers:

*It (i.e., remote teaching and learning) was very difficult for him.... It was difficult for all children, but especially for those who have some special needs. Teachers treated them equally to all other pupils. You can think how it all went. I had to sit first, learn the whole lecture and then explain it to him. Especially Maths and some other subjects that are difficult for him. For other subjects we would read textbook together, we would search for right answers, fill in workbooks. When he was studying for the test, I would examine him every night. I sit with him at least 1 hour a day to help him with everything...On one hand, this was difficult for me. But, on the other, when I see good results...I would do anything for my kids! I am fighting for him from his 2<sup>nd</sup> birthday...I am grateful to God that he is now where he is and advancing just ok.* (Mother of a 1<sup>st</sup> grade pupil with dyslexia and dyscalculia, 4-year vocational programme)

#### *Pupils' reflections on parents' support for learning during the pandemic*

Our pupil participants expressed satisfaction with parental support for their learning during the pandemic and emphasised that they highly valued parents’ occasional help. Several pupils voiced that they felt

supported and were grateful for all the help and support they received from parents and other family members during the challenging period of remote teaching. They appreciated that the parents responded positively to their invitations and were willing to provide the needed help. The words of a pupil confirm this position and demonstrate how pupils could become aware of the benefits of familial roles in their education and of the sacrifices parents make in the process:

*My parents are always involved (in my education), but now, in these tough times, they are even more involved ... and the consequences of this can be seen in them. More worries, more stress.... But I would like everyone to have this kind of relationship with their parents as I do. (4<sup>th</sup> grade pupil with mixed learning disabilities, art programme)*

In line with the desire for autonomy and independence, the pupils liked the idea of parents getting involved with their learning only occasionally, i.e. when the pupils expressed their need or when they found themselves in situations in which they could not solve some problem independently. From the pupils' perspective, constant parental support for learning would be deemed inappropriate for the upper secondary level, and its undesirability was observed in a few cases of pupils who tried to portray parental involvement as lower than it actually was (at least, from parents' perspectives). The following statement of a pupil speaks about this tendency to downplay the need for additional support and build an image of self-reliance and autonomy:

*My parents help me when I need help. But we have agreed that they do not have to help me anymore. I like doing everything on my own, and everything turns out better when I am independent. (2<sup>th</sup> grade pupil with dyslexia, 4-year vocational programme)*

## **Discussion**

In the present study, which focused on the qualitative in-depth exploration of how upper secondary school pupils with ASN and their parents experienced pandemic-induced changes in the organisation of teaching and learning and received learning support from teachers and parents, we found a plurality of pandemic experiences and vivid descriptions of participants' perspectives. Perception of the impact of the pandemic on the level of support varied significantly among participants, but the majority of pupils and parents believed that teachers' support for pupils' learning was consistently low compared to what they had experienced during their schooling in the pre-pandemic period. While acknowledging that pandemic-induced changes in the organisation of schooling and the mixing of remote models of teaching with in-school models that were in place in the last two school years were challenging for pupils with ASN and required the introduction of additional teacher and parental support, the majority of participants reported the experience of stability in teacher support and continuation of "business as usual". The pupils mostly accepted this state and showed no sense of entitlement to demand more support from teachers, which was understood as the expression of their low expectations of the educational system and poor understanding of their difficulties and right to receive individualised

support in schools. It seems that in line with the adolescent developmental stage, during which the sense of autonomy and the need for independence are developing, the pupils held themselves accountable for their learning and tried to distance themselves from their difficulties and build the image of pupils who need no extra help. They demonstrated some reluctance, even to ask their parents for additional support, although they generally valued their parents' dedication and readiness to help in case of need.

Regarding parents' perspectives on learning support for their children, we found that many parents who took a passive role in their child's education did not get involved in at-home learning without the child's explicit invitation and were not very knowledgeable about the child's ASN and options available within the educational system for providing individualised support and adjustments. However, there were also several highly engaged parents who showed a high level of understanding of their children's difficulties, intensified their involvement in their children's learning and took some of the teachers' role (i.e. provided direct instruction in school subjects) during the pandemic to help children adapt to the new situation and meet heightened demands of schooling under the pandemic regime. Greater involvement of these parents was motivated by not only their greater sense of responsibility for helping their children who were struggling in the system but also their wish to mitigate the effects of the inabilities of the system to adequately recognise and address the needs of children with ASN during the pandemic.

Our findings related to the perceptions of stability of support for pupils' learning during the pandemic were in contrast with research in various educational contexts that reported on the reduction of IEP service provision during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. Castro-Kemp & Mahmud, 2021; Chen et al., 2022; Colombo & Santagati, 2022; Toseeb et al., 2020) and about a simultaneous increase in parental involvement in children's education (e.g. Couper-Kenney & Riddell, 2021; Knopik et al., 2022; Nusser, 2021). Several factors might be responsible for the observed differences in these findings. (1) The initial levels of individualisation and support provided to pupils with ASN in Croatian schools might have been lower than in comparative countries in normal pre-pandemic circumstances (Vuk, Igrec & Ivšac, 2023). In line with this, Croatian upper-secondary pupils with ASN might not expect teachers to provide individualised support and enable a more diverse set of adjustments for themselves, especially in light of the recognition that formal IEPs might be "not functioning" from the start of schooling process i.e. in elementary education (Brozović, 2014). (2) Croatia had shorter school closure periods during the pandemic than most other countries, which might make the pandemic schooling experience less distinctive and different from regular experiences. (3) Contrary to the other studies, our study was conducted with pupils on the level of upper secondary education that might function differently during the pandemic (e.g. pupils on higher levels might need less support due to a higher level of development of digital competences relevant for remote teaching and learning). In addition, upper secondary education might be different from lower educational levels in terms of expectations (of teachers, pupils and parents) regarding pupils' level of self-regulation and autonomy of learning and in the resulting level of provided support. In upper secondary education, it might be possible that teachers expected

higher levels of pupils' independence in learning and assume that pupils were enrolled in the educational programme that is better suited to their capacities (i.e. in which their difficulties are less obvious), so they withdraw some of the support and adjustments present at the lower, compulsory educational level. The experience of a low level of parental individualised support might also be related to the decrease in the ability of parents to help at a higher level of education due to the lack of knowledge and skills necessary for providing adequate learning support.

The results reported here should be considered in light of some methodological limitations. Data were collected during single interviews with participants at one-time point. A single contact with participants might hamper the building of rapport, which is especially important given that the prejudices and stigma related to having a disability/IEP are still present in Croatian society (Igrić, Cvitković & Wagner Jakab, 2009). Interviewing practically at the end of the two years' pandemic period might produce the problem of the accuracy and thoroughness of such a retrospective account, although the measures were taken during the interviews to facilitate vivid and detailed recall. Repeated encounters with participants during the period of the pandemic would certainly produce more nuanced and detailed representations of intraindividual variations in experiences. Future research would also benefit from focusing on specific types of ASN and IEP and exploring similarities and differences in the specific needs and experiences of these pupils' groups.

The research findings presented here might be relevant for informing inclusive education policy in Croatia, but also in other educational systems that are currently facing challenges with the provision of IEPs. As schools are viewed as the drivers of inclusive communities (Schleicher, 2022), all school stakeholders should make efforts to provide targeted support for all pupils with ASN. As most pupils with ASN enter the upper secondary level with a diagnosed disability, their IEPs should be acknowledged in all schools and by every teacher. In upper secondary schools, more effort should be focused on helping teachers to fully understand pupils' ASN and provide specific adjustments for individual pupils. Only joint effort and coordination of all team members, teachers, parents and pupils with ASN can result in effective inclusive education and the full realisation of the potential of pupils with ASN in the mainstream setting.

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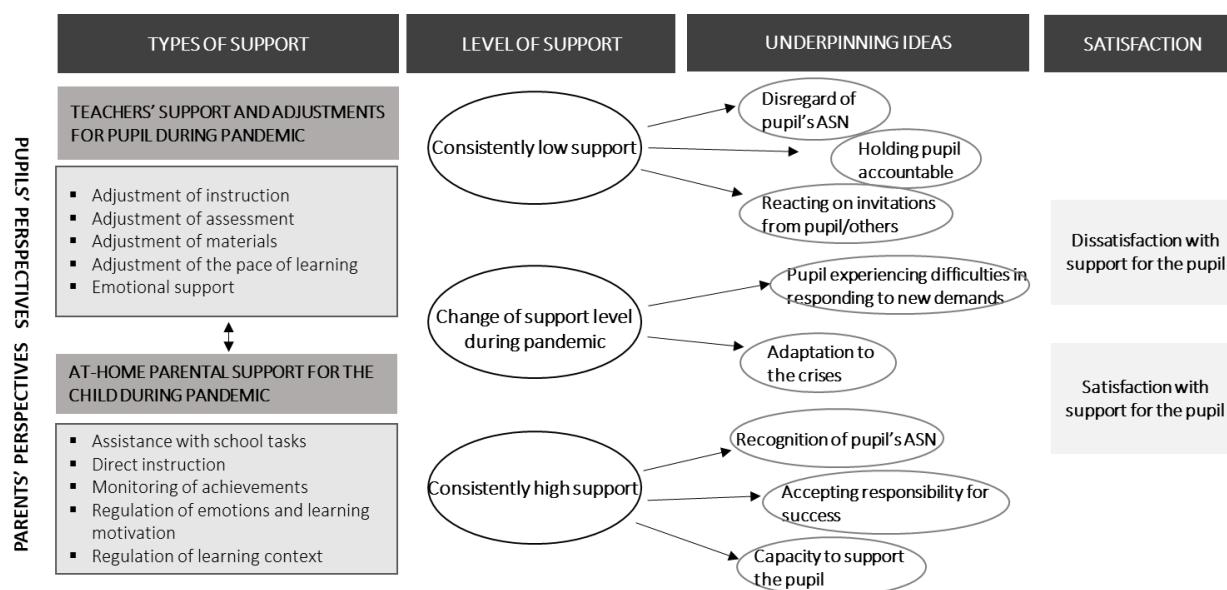
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## Tables

*Table 1.* Description of the sample of pupils and parents participating in the study

|     | Pupils' gender | Grade           | School type / size of settlement | School programme | Disability / difficulty           | Participants   |
|-----|----------------|-----------------|----------------------------------|------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------|
| 1.  | F              | 1 <sup>st</sup> | Mixed / small town               | 3-y VET          | Learning difficulty               | Pupil + mother |
| 2.  | M              | 1 <sup>st</sup> | Mixed / small town               | 4-y VET          | Dyslexia, dyscalculia             | Pupil + mother |
| 3.  | F              | 1 <sup>st</sup> | Gymnasium / regional centre      | GENERAL          | Dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia | Pupil + mother |
| 4.  | M              | 2 <sup>nd</sup> | Mixed / small town               | 4-y VET          | Dyslexia                          | Pupil + mother |
| 5.  | M              | 2 <sup>nd</sup> | Mixed / small town               | 4-y VET          | Autism spectrum disorder          | Pupil + mother |
| 6.  | F              | 3 <sup>rd</sup> | Vocational / small town          | 4-y VET          | Attention deficit disorder        | Pupil + mother |
| 7.  | M              | 3 <sup>rd</sup> | Vocational / regional centre     | 3-y VET          | Autism spectrum disorder          | Pupil + father |
| 8.  | F              | 3 <sup>rd</sup> | Vocational / small town          | 3-y VET          | Mixed learning difficulty         | Pupil + mother |
| 9.  | F              | 4 <sup>th</sup> | Gymnasium / regional centre      | GENERAL          | Dyslexia                          | Pupil + mother |
| 10. | M              | 4 <sup>th</sup> | Vocational / regional centre     | 4-y VET          | Autism spectrum disorder          | Pupil + mother |
| 11. | F              | 4 <sup>th</sup> | Mixed / regional centre          | 4-y VET          | Mixed learning difficulty         | Pupil + mother |
| 12. | M              | 4 <sup>th</sup> | Art / Zagreb                     | 4-y ART          | Learning difficulty               | Pupil + mother |

## Figures



*Figure 1.* Thematic map based on analysis of the pupils' and parents' interview data