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The school counsellors about participation of pupils with learning difficulties

Abstract: The article is based on the assumption that, given the commitment to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the Salamanca Declaration (1994), pupil participation in school should indeed be present in all processes that take place on a daily basis. Because many pupils face major or minor learning difficulties during their time at school, the issue of participation in solving these problems is critical, especially when a pupil has learning difficulties. In a representative sample of school counsellors from Slovenian primary schools, a combined quantitative–qualitative survey revealed that pupils' participation in most processes or activities in school is present in just over two-fifths of schools (44%), although the majority of school counsellors (90.9%) believe that pupils' participation in planning and providing learning assistance to pupils with learning difficulties is crucial. The qualitative analysis showed that the notion of participation is very modest and often tautological, and most counsellors see obstacles to the implementation of participation mainly among pupils, but also among school staff and management. In further research on pupil participation, it would be good to consider the perspective of pupils with learning difficulties and include more qualitative and quantitative research techniques.

Keywords: child participation, pupils with learning difficulties, obstacles, school management, inclusion

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Introduction

The participation of children in shaping, selecting and making decisions concerning their lives has become the subject of numerous studies, discussions and policy developments (Alderson 2008; Hart 1992; Lansdown 2010; Shier 2001), especially since the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (hereinafter: »the Convention«) in 1989. This framework document has been instrumental in raising awareness about the importance of children's participation, which is highlighted in Article 12. Thus, children have been recognised as having, in addition to the right to protection and care, the right to be heard and participate in decisions about their own lives according to their age and maturity (Donnelly 2010; Lansdown 2010; Vis and Thomas 2009). However, the diction »in accordance with the age and maturity of the child« enshrined in the Convention (1989) raises many questions about when a child is mature or old enough to influence decision-making so that adults can also take their views into consideration when making decisions. In this situation, adults are obliged to respect the principles and rights of the Convention and ensure its implementation, but a problem can arise when adults encounter their own ideas and interpretations about the appropriate age and maturity of a child (Kroflič 2010; Lansdown 2001, 2010; Rutar 2012; Woodhead 2010).

Some studies (Collins 2017; Fitzgerald et al. 2009; Lansdown 2005; Saywitz et al. 2010; Schofield 2005) have shown that participation has a number of positive effects for children (e.g., positive experiences with participation can increase a child's self-confidence, self-esteem and certain skills such as learning to formulate an opinion and cooperating with others; it can also have a positive effect on the development of autonomy and growing up to be an independent adult). At the same time, awareness of the importance of pupil participation in school education has been raised. Numerous studies (DeRoiste et al. 2012; Eriksson 2006; Finn and Cox 1992; Law et al. 2004; McMahon and Zyngier 2009; Niia et al. 2014; Robinson 2014; Smith 2007) have shown that involving children in decision-making not only encourages pupils to participate actively in a democratic society, but also contributes to pupils' achievements and success (e.g., a more positive attitude

of pupils towards school, themselves and learning, a more cooperative attitude between teachers and pupils). The implementation of this right in the education process may be particularly challenging for pupils who may find it more difficult to articulate their opinions and views, for pupils with limited communication skills or for pupils with special educational needs (hereinafter: »SEN«) (Eriksson 2006; MacIver et al. 2019; Robinson 2014). The latter also include pupils who, for some reason, are less successful in school, that is, pupils with learning difficulties (hereinafter: »LDs«). In the Slovenian school system, these pupils do not acquire the formal status of pupils with SEN, who have additional rights, but the school should address their educational needs within the regular work programme and existing professional resources. Considering that Slovenia (like many other countries) is not only a signatory of the Convention (1989) but also committed itself to promoting inclusive schools already in 1994 by signing the Salamanca Declaration (1994), the question of involving pupils in solving their LDs is even more important (Lesar 2007). The purpose of the present paper is to investigate how counsellors experience the participation of pupils with LDs.

Participation of children in school education

Many authors have written about children's participation in general, but the most frequently mentioned are Hart (1992), Shier (2001) and Lansdown (2001, 2010). Hart (1992) designed a well-known eight-step participation ladder that shows the extent to which young people are involved in decision-making and implementation. The special feature of his participation model is that it also includes the first three steps, the so-called »nonparticipation«, in which children are not really involved in the processes, but their apparent participation justifies those who have the power to »teach« or »cure« children. Despite some differences in the formulation of their definitions of children's participation, all three have in common that the different steps of participation follow one other from the step where children are able to express their views on issues relevant to them, but these are not necessarily taken into account to the step where children share power and responsibility with adults for decisions relevant to them, their opinions are heard and taken into account, and children are recognised as active and competent interlocutors. In the case of pupils with LDs, this means that these pupils should have the opportunity to speak not only about their LD(s), but also about possible forms of assistance, implementation and evaluation of assistance, that is, have a say in all phases of the process (Kodele 2017).

It is not uncommon for adults with otherwise good intentions to help pupils with LDs decide *for* them and not *with* them. Particularly in more persistent LDs, the pupil is usually »examined« and »judged« as objectively as possible by an expert (professional and medical discourses predominate), hence usually identifying the LD(s) without talking to the pupil and their parents. In further searching for solutions, experts undoubtedly rely on system-level solutions—in Slovenia, pupils should go through a five-level continuum of support (Kavkler 2011; Mellard et

al. 2010) before being granted the status SEN; this continuum particularly focuses on their expertise on the effectiveness of different forms of assistance. The five-level continuum of support does not prevent pupil participation, but neither does it explicitly emphasise it. Based on research findings (Magajna et al. 2008; Vršnik Perše et al. 2016), the evaluation of the implemented forms of assistance is rarely, if ever, carried out only by »experts« within the team. Therefore, it would be important for adults to realise as soon as possible how important it is to support the pupil in identifying their LDs, to plan, implement and evaluate the assistance provided (Kodele 2017) and to not accept anything without talking to the pupil and obtaining their consent.

In the name of protection and care, we often overlook a pupil with an LD, and our interpretations and solutions are often conditioned by imagining the pupil as a helpless and incompetent person unable to express their opinion (Kroflič 2010, 2015; Lodge 2005; Loreman 2009). Therefore, the obstacles to achieving pupil participation often represent negative and low adult expectations of children because, too often, the unique characteristics of the child do not match adult standards or adults want to improve children's characteristics (e.g., limited communication skills of children, inability to solve problems, etc.) (Hart 1992; Lansdown 2010; Loreman 2009). Other barriers may include adult resistance to participation—often because of the cultural and social context—adult persuasion that children's participation leads to a lack of respect for adults (Lansdown 2010) and the fact that adults are not sufficiently qualified to encourage children's participation (look for opportunities to use different media to engage children in conversations, encourage them to express their opinions, etc.) (Lansdown 2010; Malone and Hartung 2010). Because an individual's perceptions significantly influence an individual's view or interpretation in a given context and, consequently, their actions (Lansdown 2010; Loreman 2009; Polak 2008; Valenčič Zuljan 2004), we wondered how the counsellors in Slovenian primary schools perceive pupil participation.

Some earlier studies (Breiting et al. 2005; Deal and Peterson 1999; Hodges et al. 2020; Katsenou et al. 2013; McCormack et al. 2021; Tiusanen 2017; Wilson 2002) have shown that pupil participation is inextricably linked to school culture, for example, to the unconscious values and beliefs shared by members of the school community that shape the school's identity. Similarly, Polak (2008) notes that the origin of all decisions and actions of school staff is their psychological system, which is influenced by their job satisfaction and work environment. The school or school management is certainly the responsible party for providing such a school culture that takes into account and involves every pupil, which is the so-called »inclusive culture« (Dyson et al. 2004). Above all, school must provide the space, time and opportunity for the pupil to participate so that their opinion is heard and taken into account in the teaching process while involving the pupil in the decision-making process (Messiou 2002). This is even more important when working with pupils with LDs. Starting with the fact that the reasons for LDs are numerous and varied and that there are not only individual, but also social, cultural and economic reasons, it is necessary to take into account the individuality and specificity of each pupil. As G. Čačinovič Vogrinčič (2008) shows, it often

happens that adults take their own definition of an LD for granted and leave the pupil only with the option to accept this definition. In this way, adults can deprive children of the experience of discovering and developing their own functioning that would help them succeed.

A special feature of the Slovenian school system is the school counselling service, which is a unique form of school counselling in Europe (and in other countries of the former Yugoslavia). It is established in all preschools, primary and secondary schools, as well as in boarding schools and educational institutions for young people with behavioural problems. The school counselling service is an organisational form of assistance that has different profiles depending on the size and needs of the institutions: pedagogue, psychologist, social worker, special pedagogue, social pedagogue and inclusive pedagogue. The assistance of school counselling service is directed not only at the pupils, but also at the teachers, school management and parents, with whom they collaborate in the following areas: learning and teaching, school culture, education, atmosphere/climate and rules, care of physical, cognitive, moral, emotional and social development of pupils, educational and career guidance and socio-economic difficulties (Gregorčič Mrvar et al. 2020; Programske smernice 2008). As a rule, the help of school counsellors in solving pupils with LD(s)'s problems is not provided in groups but individually, usually outside the classroom (Vršnik Perše et al. 2016), which can greatly facilitate the participation of pupils in the solution process of LDs.

Based on the assumption that it is necessary to ensure pupils' participation in all processes related to their lives, including the process of overcoming LDs, the question is whether including the pupil's perspective on LDs can help overcoming them more effectively (similar to Rudduck and Flutter 2004). By involving pupils in the resolution process, it is possible to give them another important message: school staff are (supposedly) experts in various strategies and techniques for overcoming LDs, but without the pupil articulating their LDs, trying different forms of help and evaluating them, all these techniques and strategies are often ineffective. However, it is crucial that we creatively apply this professional knowledge to concrete problems, taking into account the aspects that adults without pupils cannot recognise or identify.

The research problem

As the occurrence of LDs is very common (Košak Babuder and Velikonja 2011; Magajna et al. 2008; Vršnik Perše et al. 2016) and is experienced by everyone to a different extent during school, the question arises regarding how counsellors in Slovenian primary schools perceive the participation of pupils in the process of solving their LDs.

In the research, we were interested in the following:
– Whether, in the counsellors' estimation, pupils' participation is generally present at their schools? Is the involvement of pupils with LDs important in the planning and implementation of learning assistance?

– How do school counsellors understand the concept of pupil participation?
– What factors do school counsellors think can inhibit the participation of pupils with LDs?
– What obstacles do school counsellors recognise in realising the participation of pupils, especially pupils with LDs?

Methodology

Type of research

In our study, a combined quantitative–qualitative research approach was used with the questionnaire as a tool. The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana, nb. 01/2014 and was conducted as part of a doctoral dissertation. For the purposes of the present paper, selected data from the survey questionnaire, which originally included 25 questions (10 closed-ended, 11 open-ended and 4 semi-open-ended) were analysed. The Cronbach's coefficient alpha was between 0.613 and 0.676 (more about this in Kodele 2017).

Population

The population consists of counsellors who worked in school counselling in mainstream schools during the 2014/2015 school year and whose scope of work was pupils with LDs. Following Huberman's (1993) model, nearly two-fifths (39.6%) of counsellors with 7 to 18 years of experience and one-fifth (19.8%) of counsellors with 19 to 30 years of experience participated. The number of counsellors with 4 to 6 years of experience (17.6%) and counsellors with 1 to 3 years of experience (15.5%) was slightly lower. The smallest group of counsellors (7.5%) were those between the ages of 31 and 40. The results refer to primary schools only; the text will continue to use only the term »school«.

Data collection and analysis

The questionnaire, which had previously been piloted, was sent electronically to all 450 mainstream schools in Slovenia in February 2015 with the request that the questionnaire be completed by school counsellors who spend most of their working time with pupils with LDs. A total of 342 questionnaires were returned, of which 189 were valid (i.e., those where the school counsellors answered at least one-third of the questions), representing 42% of the total population. Not all respondents answered all the questions asked, so the figures for each question are shown separately. Because this was an online survey, the questionnaire began with a conviction to explain all the necessary information about the survey (e.g.,

the purpose of the research, data collection and anonymity, and a consent form). By clicking the »Continue« button, the respondent agreed to participate in the survey. The respondents also had the right to withdraw their responses at any point in the response process.

The collected material was analysed quantitatively using the statistical programme SPSS 23.0. A t-test and chi-square were used to test for statistically significant differences. The responses to the open-ended questionnaires were mostly analysed using inductive thematic content analysis (Mesec 1998); only the definitions of participation were analysed deductively based on Hart's participation ladder (Hart 1992). Coding was based on the consultants' definitions, but because the concept of participation is broad, we also took into account what the consultants focused on in their responses (e.g., process, population, specific aspects of participation).

Results

The existence of participation at school and its role in the process of solving pupils' learning difficulties

As a starting point for the analysis of the results obtained, we first present the respondents' assessments regarding the participation in their school in general.

Do you estimate that pupils in your school participate in most of the processes or activities that also affect pupils (e.g., organising and carrying out various activities, planning and carrying out lessons, etc.)?	f	f (%)
YES	81	44.0
NO	103	56.0
Total	184	100.0

Table 1: Presence of pupils' participation in the school

Table 1 shows that, according to the assessment of counsellors, participation is only present in more than two-fifths of the schools, so the participation in most processes or activities that can also affect pupils (e.g., organising and carrying out various activities and planning and delivering lessons) is absent in more than half of the schools.

We also asked the surveyed counsellors a half-open question as to whether the participation of the pupils in the planning and implementation of the learning assistance is crucial for them to effectively help the pupils with LDs and asked them to briefly justify their answer.

Do you think that pupils' participation in the planning and implementation of learning assistance for pupils with LDs is crucial for effective assistance?	f	f %
YES	160	90.9
NO	16	9.1
Total	*176*	*100.0*

Table 2: The importance of pupils' participation in planning and implementing learning assistance

The majority (90.9%) of the counsellors assessed that pupil participation in the planning and implementation of learning assistance is crucial for effective assistance. Some (f = 113) supported their assessment for various reasons, which we have divided into the following group sets in the qualitative analysis. Participation of pupils with LD can be divided as follows:

– contributes to a greater motivation of the pupils to solve LD (f = 62).
– is a prerequisite for the pupil to collaborate more actively in the learning and assistance process (f = 21) to improve their working habits, become more independent, gain self-esteem and, above all, ensure that the assistance offered to the pupil can be successful at all.
– influences the actual planning and implementation of assistance (f = 12).
– helps the pupil take more responsibility for solving their LD (f = 11).
– is necessary because the pupils are competent interlocutors or experts based on personal experience (f = 7).

However, nearly one-tenth (9.1%) of the counsellors estimated that pupil participation in the planning and implementation of learning assistance is not crucial for effective assistance, mainly because of the following reasons:

– pupils are not yet mature enough to participate (f = 6), so school staff must decide on the planning and implementation of the learning assistance.
– cooperation with the parents of the pupils with LD is central to the effectiveness of assistance, not the participation of the pupils (f = 2).

Although most of the counsellors state that participation is central to the planning and implementation of effective learning assistance, it is surprising that participation is only implemented in more than two-fifths of the schools. Therefore, we ask ourselves where we should look for the reasons for this unusual discrepancy. Because it is precisely the notions of school staff that have a considerable influence on the implementation of processes (Dahlberg and Moss 2006; Jeznik 2015; Kroflič 2010; Lesar 2007; Polak 2008; Rinaldi 2006; Valenčič Zuljan 2004), we were interested in counsellors' notions of pupil participation.

The notion of pupil participation among counsellors

The counsellors were asked what they meant by »pupil participation« and asked them to briefly describe their understanding of the concept. In the qualita-

tive analysis, we looked for content emphases in the definitions, which could be classified into five categories (see Table 3).

Analysis of definitions according to predominant content		f
Tautological		69
Population	pupils with LDs	40
	pupils with SEN status	15
		∑55
General	whole school activity	38
	teaching	6
	learning	3
	content selection	3
	decision-making	3
		∑53
Individual aspects of participation	planning	20
	implementation	16
	evaluation	11
		∑47
Ignorance of concept of participation		2

Table 3: Qualitative analysis of the definitions of pupils' participation of counsellors

The analysis shows that some of the of definitions are indeed tautological (f = 69); that is, the counsellors describe the understanding of the term participation only with different words of the same meaning (e.g., participation, involvement, pupil participation). From these records, it is difficult to understand what pupil participation means in everyday school life, that is, whether pupils can express their opinions on issues that are important to them, whether their opinions and suggestions are taken into account, in which areas they can participate in decision-making and so forth. In addition, some counsellors (f = 55) link their understanding of the concept of participation with pupils, either with pupils with LDs (f = 40) or with pupils with status SEN (f = 15). Some (f = 53) give general definitions of the concept of participation and link it either to the whole school activity (f = 38) or to the possibility of involving pupils in content selection, teaching, learning and decision-making ($\sum f$ = 15). A large number of counsellors (f = 37) define the concept of participation as the possibility of actively involving pupils in individual aspects of participation, with the planning of an activity in the foreground (f = 20), followed by implementation (f = 16) and evaluation (f = 11). However, two counsellors do not seem familiar with the concept of participation.

The understanding of the concept of counsellors' participation was also compared with Hart's (1992) ladder of participation because it allows for the most comprehensive classification of the definitions received, including nonparticipation (see Table 4).

Definitions according to Hart's ladder of participation	f
1. step: Manipulation	1
2. step: Decoration	0
3. step: Tokenism	1
4. step: Assigned but informed	15
5. step: Consulted and informed	39
6. step: Adult-initiated, shared decisions with children	19
7. step: Child-initiated and directed	2
8. step: Child-initiated, shared decisions with adults	0
Undefined	112

Table 4: Participation definition of counsellors according to Hart's participation ladder

Because of the modesty or ambiguity of the record regarding the relationship between adults and pupils, in more than half of the cases, the step of participation could not be determined: regular attendance at hours of assistance and active participation.

In other cases, however, individual definitions of participation could mostly (f = 39) be placed at the fifth step of participation, such as the following: Participation of the pupils. Based on pupil experience. Consider their strengths and weaknesses. Encourage pupils to share their suggestions and follow their suggestions.

The sixth (f = 19) and fourth step (f = 15) follow. However, only two records indicated being assigned to the seventh level of participation, for example: This means that the pupils are cocreators of the process, and they cooperate by contributing their own opinions and suggestions. I understand this concept as the pupils' ability to make their own decisions about themselves. About their active participation and involvement in school activities.

In less than one-third of the surveyed counsellors (31.7%), we found the notion of participation, which, according to Hart (1992), could be classified as real participation (steps 5, 6 and 7). Following Hart (1992), we have placed the definitions under real participation from step 5 on because, from this step on, adults consult with children about how their ideas and opinions will influence the decisions of the adults, and the children are also informed about them.

Among the definitions of participation, there were also two datasets that Hart would define as nonparticipation, and we placed one in the third step: Active participation of pupils in the development of a plan for implementing the learning assistance, how, when and what exactly their tasks are, what is expected of them.

One definition was even included in the first step: By this I mean the willingness of the pupils to accept assistance, to be guided and to consider and follow the instructions and recommendations they receive during the hours of additional professional assistance. I see this as the pupil's interest and self-motivation to complete the tasks, in the sense of filling in gaps in their knowledge and the ability to learn various social skills.

To check whether the definitions of counsellors' participation influence the assessment of the existence of participation in their school, we first formed two groups of surveyed counsellors based on the above analysis: a numerically smaller group whose definitions were rated at the fifth or higher step and the others whose definitions were rated under step 5. The test of the independence hypothesis showed no statistically significant differences ($\chi2$ (1) = 2.13, sig. = .145), meaning that the assessment of the existence of participation at school is not significantly connected to their notions of participation. Our hypothesis that the notion of the participation of counsellors, who otherwise work with everyone at school (pupils and their parents, teachers, management and external institutions), is related to the implementation of participation was not confirmed. From the data and analyses, the counsellors in Slovenian schools attribute a greater role to other factors (presented below) in the implementation of participation.

Factors that make an important contribution to the realisation of participation of pupils with LDs

In addition, we were also interested in examining what factors, according to the counsellors, influence the participation of pupils with LDs. The school counsellors were asked to rate the factors listed in Table 5 on a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 means that they believe the factor influences pupil participation the most and 7 the least.

Factors affecting the participation of pupils with LDs	M	St. d.	n
The preference of the school management for the pupils' participation in the process of solving their LD	2.23	1.343	168
Willingness of the teacher/counsellor to involve pupils in the process of solving theirs LDs	2.46	1.237	168
Socio-economic status of pupils with LDs	3.02	1.512	168
Good cooperation of the parents of pupils with LDs with the school	3.68	1.718	167
Pupils' age	4.90	1.329	167
Pupils' gender	5.58	1.319	167
Pupils' ethnicity	6.12	1.279	167

Table 5: The influence of individual factors on the participation of pupils with LDs in solving their LDs
Note: 1 – most influence, 2 – influence, 3 – partly influence, 4 – neither, nor, 5 – partly does not influence, 6 – little influence, 7 – least influence

As shown in Table 5, the participation of pupils with LDs in the solution process is, in the opinion of the counsellors, most strongly influenced by the preference of the school management for pupil participation (M = 2.23) and the willingness of the school staff to involve the pupil in the process (M = 2.46). This is

followed by the socio-economic position of the pupil with LD (M = 3.02) and the significant cooperation of the parents with the school (M = 3.68). According to the counsellors, pupil age (M = 4.90), pupil gender (M = 5.58) and pupil ethnicity (M = 6.12) have the least influence. As has been found in other studies (Hodges et al. 2020; Wilson 2002), an important factor in implementing participation is school management and its clearly expressed commitment to implementing participation. We also examined whether there would be differences in the influence of individual factors on participation in terms of the counsellors' perception of participation, but the analysis did not reveal any statistically significant differences.

Obstacles to the participation of pupils in general and to the participation of pupils with LD

When the counsellors were further asked where they see the obstacles to pupil participation, they could only highlight one of the answers offered that they believe is the biggest obstacle to pupil participation.

Obstacles to the participation of pupils	f	f (%)
Deeply rooted hierarchical relationships between adults and children in society that do not require the participation of children.	47	25.1
Unwillingness of adults to get involved with the ideas and thoughts of children.	38	20.3
Adults' conviction that children cannot be competent adult interlocutors because of underdeveloped higher levels of thought and judgement.	35	18.7
Adults' conviction that children do not have sufficient communication skills and experience to participate.	15	8.0
Adults believe that involving children in matters that are important to them means that we burden children with too much responsibility too early.	13	7.0
Negative and low adult expectations of children.	9	4.8
Adults' belief that the participation of children leads to a lack of respect for older people.	8	4.3
Taking the child's opinion into account when making decisions is very tiring and exhausting because it often takes a long time for a child to be ready to open up.	4	2.1
Other.	18	9.6
Total	187	100.0

Table 6: Counsellors on obstacles to pupils's participation

A quarter of the counsellors (25.1%) answer that the greatest obstacle to pupil participation is »the deeply rooted hierarchical relationships between adults and children in society, which do not require the participation of children«. A fifth of the counsellors (20.3%) choose the response »lack of willingness of adults to engage with children's ideas and thoughts« and slightly less (18.7%) rate »the adults' conviction that children cannot be competent adult interlocutors because

of an underdeveloped higher level of thinking and assessment« as a major obstacle to pupil participation. Less than one-tenth of the counsellors (8.0%) cite »the adults' conviction that children do not have sufficient communication skills and experience to participate« as a main obstacle. In addition, 7% of the respondents choose the answer »adults' conviction that children's participation in matters important to them means that we place too much responsibility on children too early«. Even fewer (4.8%) vote for the answer »adults' negative and low expectations of children«, and a similar proportion (4.3%) vote for the answer »adults' conviction that children's participation leads to a lack of respect for older people«. The smallest percentage of the counsellors (2.1%) choose the answer that »taking the child's opinion into account when making decisions is very tiring and exhausting, as it often takes a very long time for a child to be ready to open up«.

Among other obstacles to participation, the counsellors also mention lack of time, too many pupils, performance-oriented curricula, pupils' lack of interest, unrealistic expectations of pupils, irresponsibility of pupils, the way parents raise their children and that pupil participation depends on individual activities. Here, too, we examined whether counsellors who perceive participation as real recognise obstacles to its implementation other than those who do not understand participation as being complex. The calculation showed no statistically significant differences ($2\hat{I}$ (7) = 7.70, sig.= .359), meaning that the identification of obstacles to the implementation of participation does not depend on ideas about the participation of children.

We were particularly interested in those cases where the counsellors identify obstacles to pupil participation in the process of solving their LDs. Because we wanted to gain insight into their independent articulation of the obstacles they actually face in the solution process LDs, we offered them an open question and then divided the answers (n = 141) into six categories.

Obstacles to the participation of pupils with LDs	f	f (%)
Obstacles on the part of the pupils	78	55.3
Obstacles on the part of school staff or schools	73	51.8
Systemic obstacles	29	20.6
Obstacles on the part of the parents	17	12.1
Poor relationship between pupils and school staff	10	7.1
The importance of adult support for a pupils with LDs	4	2.8

Table 7: Obstacles to the participation of pupils with LDs from the perspective of the counsellors

The most frequent (f = 78) obstacles mentioned by the counsellors are those on the pupils' side:
– Pupils' lack of motivation to deal with LDs, which led to their irresponsibility.
– Obstacles related to the personality traits of pupils, their specificities (e.g., emotional and behavioural problems of the pupil, their intellectual abilities),

with particular emphasis on the immaturity and age of the pupil and the low self-esteem of the pupil with LDs.
– Social and economic situation or life situation of their family.

Obstacles on the part of staff or schools (f = 73) that the respondents most frequently named include the following:
– The belief of school staff in the pupil as an incompetent being.
– Unwillingness of the school staff to enable and encourage the participation of the pupils with LDs.
– The lack of professional knowledge of the teachers to work with the pupils with LDs.
– The lack of incentives for the participation of pupils with LDs by the school management.
– Bad school atmosphere.

In addition to obstacles on the part of the pupils and school, the counsellors frequently mention systemic obstacles (f = 29), here reflected in a lack of time and the resulting overload of the school staff, as well as obstacles on the part of the parents (f = 17), which mainly concern the poor integration of parents into the school or the nonparticipation of parents. Quite a few counsellors also mention poor relationships between school professionals (especially teachers) and pupils with LD as an obstacle or point out the importance of building a good relationship between a school professional and a pupil (f=10). In their responses, the counsellors also note the importance of adult support (school staff and parents) in solving LD (f = 4), but adult support sometimes seems to be misunderstood. Some counsellors imagine participation by listening to the pupil's proposal but leave the pupil completely alone in implementing the proposal. If this proves to be ineffective, they step out of the position of a person who knows more about communication with children and strengthen both groups' convictions that children should follow their proposal.

Discussion

Data analysis shows that, according to the counsellors' assessment, pupil participation in most processes or activities that also affect pupils does not take place in more than half of the schools. This is a surprising result because we expected participation to be more widespread in Slovenian schools, given that Slovenia signed the *Convention* (1989) and *Salamanca Declaration* (1994). The result is also surprising because, on the other hand, more than 90% of the counsellors state that pupil participation is crucial for effective support in resolving LDs, which is confirmed by the results of many other studies (Gersch 1996; Goepel 2009; Marentič Požarnik and Plut Pregelj 2009; Rudduck and Flutter 2004; Sharp 1996; Wade and Moore 1993).
Therefore, we asked whether the (mis)understanding of the concept espe-

cially contributes to the assessment of the existence of participation in school. The results show that a third of the counsellors give rather tautological answers to the question of what they imagine participation to be and that more than half of them, because of an insufficiently explained understanding of participation, could not be correctly classified in Hart's participation ladder. Further analyses showed that slightly less than one-third of the counsellors understand participation as real and that no significant correlations between the understanding and evaluation of the existence of participation in school could be found. Does the fact that most Slovenian formal and professional documents in the field of education do not provide real pupil participation contribute to this (Kodele and Lesar 2015)? Indeed, the participation of the pupils should be promoted not only by counsellors, but also by all school professionals and by school legislation.

Given previous research on school management as a factor that significantly contributes to the realisation of pupil participation in everyday practice (Hodges et al. 2020; Wilson 2002), it is not surprising that the counsellors see school management as a factor that enables the realisation of pupil participation to the highest degree. Obstacles to pupil participation from the perspective of counsellors are mainly obstacles on the pupil's side, on the school management's side and on systemic obstacles. It is interesting to note that the selection of obstacles in general, which we offered in advance, as well as the obstacles to participation of pupils with LDs, which the respondents themselves wrote based on their experiences, appeared quite similar in content and frequency. It is worth noting that the obstacles mentioned in the open questions emphasise the aspect of the inability of a pupil to participate in the solution of LDs.

After completing the analyses, we identified some limitations that should be taken into account in the future. The electronic form of the questionnaire enabled easier access to the respondents, but also reduced their motivation to write down their experiences, observations and understandings in more depth, hence making a more complex qualitative analysis impossible. In the future, it would be good to check the obtained data with another research technique (e.g., focus groups) and include at least pupils with LDs. Among the demographic data, it would be appropriate to include others (e.g., level and profile of education achieved, additional education in the field of LDs).

Conclusion

Slovenia, like many other countries, is not only a signatory to the *Convention* (1989), which in Article 12, recognised children as having the right to be heard and to participate in decisions about their own lives, but it is also committed to promoting inclusive schools in the signing of the *Salamanca Declaration* (1994). The question of pupils' participation in solving their LDs is even more important because this is a population in Slovenia that is not formally included in the group of children with SEN and would be entitled to legally provided forms of assistance (Lesar 2007). Therefore, the responsibility for finding solutions to pupils' LDs

rests with schools, and it would be professionally desirable to include the pupils themselves in the process of identifying LDs, offering help and evaluation of help. Especially if we start from the above assessment of the counsellors, the participation of a pupil with LDs in solving their LDs is crucial for effective assistance. This is why we invited counsellors from all Slovenian primary schools to participate in a survey to find out how much pupil participation is actually present in their schools, as well as how they understand participation, its role in solving LDs and obstacles to it.

According to the results, the participation of pupils in Slovenian primary schools is not yet part of the routine in the pedagogical practice of school staff because pupil participation in most school processes or activities that also affect pupils does not take place in more than half of the schools. The concept of pupil participation among counsellors is often tautological and shallow, and only a little under a third of the counsellors describe pupil participation in such a way that, based on Hart's ladder of participation, could be classified as real participation. We believe that only paying attention to the changing nonconstructive perceptions about the participation of (future) school staff, about their role in creating conditions for the implementation of participation and so forth is not enough. At the same time, we should also pay attention to leadership and the creation of systemic incentives and opportunities to create an appropriate (inclusive) climate and culture. The analysis of the results has shown that management and a collaborative school culture and climate are crucial to ensuring and promoting pupil participation. Therefore, it would be useful to consider how more content could be taught in school management education to create an appropriate school culture and climate. In any case, it would be worth considering how these findings could be incorporated into the process of education for future school management and professional staff.

In particular, the analysis of the respondents' open-ended answers led to the conclusion that some adults envisage the pupils' participation in the context of demonstrating and measuring power. It should be noted that this is a rather »perverse« perception because participation is actually aimed at overcoming inequalities of social power (Lynch et al. 2009). Therefore, the focus should be on creating an individual working project of help in which the child is recognised as an expert based on personal experience (Čačinovič Vogrinčič 2008) and school staff are involved in communication as experts in teaching, learning and education.

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ŠOLSKI SVETOVALNI DELAVCI O PARTICIPACIJI OTROK Z UČNIMI TEŽAVAMI

Povzetek: Članek temelji na predpostavki, da mora biti zaradi zavezanosti *Konvenciji o otrokovih pravicah* (1989) in *Salamanški izjavi* (1994) participacija učencev v šoli pravzaprav prisotna v vseh procesih, ki se vsakodnevno dogajajo. Ker se veliko učencev v času šolanja sooča z večjimi ali manjšimi učnimi težavami, je vprašanje participacije učencev pri reševanju teh težav zelo pomembno, zlasti kadar ima učenec učne težave. Na reprezentativnem vzorcu šolskih svetovalnih delavcev iz slovenskih osnovnih šol je bilo s kombinirano kvantitativno-kvalitativno raziskava ugotovljeno, da je po njihovi oceni participacija učenca pri večini procesov ali dejavnosti v šoli prisotna le na dobrih dveh petinah šol (44 %), čeprav večina šolskih svetovalnih delavcev (90,9 %) ocenjuje, da je participacija učenca pri načrtovanju in izvajanju učne pomoči zanj ključnega pomena. Kvalitativna analiza je pokazala, da so pojmovanja participacije pri večini svetovalnih delavcev zelo skromna, neredko tavtološka, da pa večina ovire za implementacijo participacije vidi predvsem v učencih, pa tudi pri strokovnih delavcih in vodstvu šole. V nadaljnjih raziskavah o participaciji učencev bi bilo dobro upoštevati perspektivo učencev z učnimi težavami ter vključiti več kvalitativnih in kvantitativnih raziskovalnih tehnik.

Ključne besede: participacija otrok, učenci z učnimi težavami, ovire za participacijo, vodstvo šole, inkluzija

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