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Primary School Teachers' Attitudes towards Inclusive Education in Slovenia: A Qualitative Exploration

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Abstract

Research Question (RQ): What are the attitudes of Slovenian primary school teachers towards the inclusion of children with special needs into regular school programs?
Purpose: The purpose of the study was to encourage teachers to share and reflect on their personal experiences with inclusive education in Slovenia. This could help in the development of more successful models of practice.
Method: This was a qualitative study. Focus interviews and individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Data was analyzed using qualitative content analysis.
Results: Five categories emerged from the data. This article focuses on three of the categories and explores the robust division of teachers into two groups depending on their overall attitudes towards the inclusion and children with special needs.
Organization: The findings of this study suggest that Slovenian education system is not fully transitioned into the inclusive model. Teacher training and practical support are often insufficient and inter-professional cooperation is not always satisfactorily established.
Society: Inclusion of children with special needs reflects the quality of the whole school system and has implications for the functioning of the society.
Originality: This is the first study in Slovenia that explored teachers' attitudes towards inclusion. It This study deepened the understanding of the phenomenon of inclusion and linked the findings with international studies on inclusion.
Limitations / further research: Future research should explore the development and implementation of relevant teaching programs and courses as well as the development of better support networks within an inclusive model of education that should champion collaboration and cooperation.

Keywords: children with special needs, inclusion, education, teacher's attitudes, qualitative study, models of practice.

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1 Introduction

Educating all children together regardless of their physical and mental abilities is not a new concept. It is now being implemented worldwide and has been studied extensively. Numerous international declarations and guidelines have been signed in relation to this topic. They include The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), United Nation's Convention on The Rights of the Child (1989), The Salamanca Statement (1994) and the UNESCO's document from 2005 'Guidelines for inclusion: Ensuring access to education for all', to name a few. Including a child with special needs into a regular school program is also an important aspect of the concept of participation and is seen as a basic human right (Florian, 2008, pp. 202-208).

In Slovenia, 13,024 children are categorized as having special needs. Every year, a higher percentage of them are included in regular school programs, which presents a unique challenge for the existing school system (Bratož, 2004, pp. 9-49). The transition from models of practice that favoured segregation to models of practice preferring integration was not an uncomplicated one, and it is still ongoing on many levels. The paradigm shift required a new professional and organisational perspective, which challenged the established educational process, learning priorities and team working models.

It has been established that some teachers hold more positive attitudes towards inclusive education and can be more sensitive and flexible when teaching children with special needs (Fairbanks et al., 2010, pp. 161-171). Forlin and Chambers (2011, pp. 17-32) also ascertained that the teacher's views and attitudes often determine the success of integration more than their professional knowledge and formal preparations.

Since teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion model and children with special needs appear to be an important predictor of the level of success (Engelbrecht, Nel,Nel, & Tlale, 2015, pp. 1-10; Forlin & Chambers, 2011, pp. 17-32; Kemp & Carter, 2005, pp. 31-44), the present study aimed to explore the attitudes of primary school teachers in Slovenia towards integration of children with special needs into their classrooms.

This study built on the previously conducted quantitative study among Slovenian teachers that reported an overall positive attitude towards integration and inclusion (Gaber et al., 2016). Qualitative methodology was therefore employed to further explore teachers' attitudes in relation to the phenomenon of inclusion, and increase the understanding of the process from the teachers' perspective.

The research question this study aimed to answer was: What are the attitudes of Slovenian primary school teachers towards the inclusion of children with special needs into regular school programs?

2 Theoretical framework

2.1 Inclusion and participation of children with special needs

The classroom environment offers ideal circumstances for a child to develop his social skills and progress developmentally (Case-Smith & Holland, 2009, pp. 416-423). School participation combines the criteria of (1) all children attending the school program jointly, and (2) the implementation of therapy interventions for children with special needs inside the classroom, whilst including a focus on the child's ordinary day-to-day activities (Case-Smith & Holland, 2009, pp. 416-423). The new models of practice that aim to support the participation of children with special needs in regular school programs need to take these two criteria into consideration.

In connection with therapy interventions, the approach that dominated work with children with special needs in the past was the so called pull-out approach. It involved physically removing the child from the classroom for therapy interventions, and working with him in a separate room. Now, the 'push-in' approach has taken over, which encourages working with the child in the classroom at all times (Ericksen, 2010, pp.64-69; Rens & Joosten, 2014, pp. 148-158).

There appear to be significant differences between different countries when it comes to implementing inclusion, and these often relate to the diversity that exists between different locales (Savolainen, Engelbrecht, Nel, & Malinen, 2012, pp. 51-68). It has been highlighted that the discussion on inclusion often neglects differences between environments, which include cultural, historical and legal aspects (Kozleski, Artiles, Fletcher, & Engelbrecht, 2007, pp.19-34). It is important to consider cultural and historical influences and recognize that models cannot be transferred between environments in a simplified manner unless they are appropriately adapted first and made culturally relevant.

2.2 Preparation for inclusion

For inclusion to be successful, teachers need to be familiar with the process and its challenges. It is of paramount importance to develop and upgrade the teachers' knowledge, practical skills and also their value system. Florian (2008, pp. 202-208) describes three considerations that can help support inclusion and pertain to the teachers' skills, education and working techniques:

1. Primary school teachers are not specialised to teach children with special needs.

2. The teacher training curriculum needs to include topics that cover the subject of individuality and of 'being different'.

3. Teachers need to master new teaching techniques and connect with other professionals who are specialised in working with children with special needs. This is how teachers will get the adequate support that will enable the development of a collaborative approach.

The child, too, needs to be sufficiently prepared for the transition into the school environment, within the regular school system. Research suggests that the outcome of inclusion will be better if the preparation phase focuses on the development of skills that the child should master before entering the regular school program (Kemp & Carter, 2005, pp. 31-44). There is no consensus on which skills are crucial for the child, but it is clear that academic skills are not in the forefront. The most important skills seem to be those related to (1) functioning in the classroom (listening to the teacher, following instructions, obeying classroom rules), (2) communication, (3) social interactions and (4) activities of personal care (Kemp & Carter, 2005, pp. 31-44).The priorities frequently change with the child's age and level of education.

2.3 Attitudes towards inclusion

2.3.1 Factors that influence teachers' attitudes

A literature review by Avramidis and Norwich (2002, pp. 277-93) showed that teachers have an overall positive attitude towards the inclusion of children with special needs into regular school programs. The authors identified some of the factors that contribute to teachers' attitudes. These include:

1. teacher-related factors (age, gender, work experience, previous education);
2. child-related factors (type of disability),
3. environmental factors (finances, resources, staffing).

These factors were also acknowledged in more recent research on inclusion (Engelbrecht et al., 2015, pp.1-10; Forlin & Chambers, 2011, pp. 17-32; Oswald & Swart, 2010, pp. 389-403).

Ellins and Porter (2005, pp. 188-195) studied teachers' attitudes towards inclusion in a primary school in Great Britain. They focused on the subject the teachers taught and came to the conclusion that teachers who taught mathematics, science and English held a less favourable attitude towards inclusion compared to their colleagues. Children with special needs also achieved lower results in these subjects. Science teachers had the most negative attitude towards inclusion out of all, and children with special needs received the lowest results in their subject.

Attitudes towards inclusion also appear to correlate with the level and type of the child's disability. The least support exists for the inclusion of children who have emotional or behavioural problems (Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2000a, pp. 277-93). An Australian study that included 67 student teachers showed a similar trend (Forlin & Chambers, 2011, pp.17-32). According to that study, future teachers held less positive attitudes towards inclusion of children who could be physically violent towards others.

A South African study also indicated that female teachers are more accepting of inclusion compared to their male colleagues, but at the same time, they experience more anxiety regarding the process (Oswald & Swart, 2011, pp. 389-403). In other international studies,

too, women were perceived as more open to the idea of inclusion compared to male teachers (Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2000a, pp. 277-93; Ellins & Porter, 2005, pp. 188-195; Forlin, Kawai, Higuchi, 2015, pp. 314-331; Malinen et al., 2013,pp. 34-44).

Furthermore, Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden (2000b, pp. 191-211) also found that attitudes towards inclusion are more positive in teachers who have previous experiences with the inclusion process or who have actively performed it themselves.

2.3.2 Influence of education and courses on teachers' attitudes towards inclusion

While educational programs remain unchanged in length, universities are increasingly aware that the curriculum needs to be adjusted to include topics that pertain to the teachers' new roles and responsibilities (Forlin, Loreman, Sharma, & Earle, 2009, pp.195-209). A qualitative study by Engelbrecht et al. (2015, pp. 1-10) showed that one of the main factors limiting the process of inclusion was the existing model of education that focused on the medical, deficit-orientated approach.

Many studies have been conducted among student teachers to capture the attitudes of future professionals. Oswald and Swart (2011, pp. 389-403) performed a study that assessed the attitudes of 180 student teachers towards inclusion prior and post to completing a course on this subject. After the intervention, attitudes towards inclusion improved and so did the general attitude towards people with special needs. However, the study also found that as students received more knowledge on inclusion and children with special needs, they also became more worried about the implementation of such a program. The authors concluded that the ambivalence could have stemmed from becoming more aware of different limitations to successful inclusion such as limited resources and support (Oswald & Swart, 2011, pp. 389-403). A study by Forlin and Chambers (2011, pp. 17-32) that included Australian student teachers came to a similar conclusion. Following a course on inclusion and children with special needs, some of the students' anxieties increased. Students who generally felt more confident about their teaching abilities and knowledge had less worries regarding inclusion. Nonetheless, the authors conclude that improving the student teachers' knowledge did not automatically improve their attitudes towards inclusion.

In contrast, an American study of 326 student teachers showed that following a course on inclusion, the anxiety about inclusion and working with children with special needs decreased. Furthermore, after the course, student teachers were slightly more in favour of inclusion – their attitude shifted to neutrality (Shippen,Crites, Houchins, Ramsey, & Simon, 2005, pp. 92-99).

Some literature suggests that already brief courses on inclusion can make a difference (Campbell, Gilmore & Cuskelly, 2003, pp. 369-79; Sharma, 2012, pp. 53-66). According to Sharma, a 20-hour course can suffice to positively change the attitudes towards inclusion of children with special needs. However, Engelbrecht et al. (2015, pp. 1-10) reached a different conclusion. After studying a South African sample, the authors believe short courses on inclusion do not suffice and do not give the desired outcomes.

Positive attitudes towards inclusion cannot be mandated and no solution has been found yet that would address this issue and reassure future teachers. Experts believe that courses and additional education have a limited scope. Nonetheless, they are considered important and necessary tools for improving the process of inclusion (Engelbrecht et al., 2015, pp.1-10; Oswald & Swart, 2011, pp. 389-403).

2.4 Relationship between the teacher and other professionals that influences inclusion

Literature from North America, Australia, United Kingdom and Sweden emphasises that in order to successfully include the child with special needs into regular school programs there needs to be an established collaboration between the teacher and other professionals (Helena Hemmingsson, Gustavsson, & Townsend, 2007, pp. 383-398; Kennedy & Stewart, 2012, pp. 147-155; Nochajski, 2002, pp.101-112; Rens & Joosten, 2014, pp. 148-158; Villeneuve & Hutchinson, 2012).

According to the theoretical framework of collaboration developed by Friend (2000, pp. 130-132), collaboration is a style of interaction characterized by participation that is voluntary. All parties engaged in it have an equal status as they work towards a common goal. People who collaborate also share decision making, resources, and accountability for outcomes. For good collaboration, it is important to know each other's professional characteristics and competencies, to have an effective communication style (both formal and informal) and have a positive working and personal relationship. As collaboration takes place, new practices develop and team members learn and grow as they solve different problems together (Villeneuve & Hutchinson, 2012).

2.5 Models of practice

The existing models of work that support school-based collaboration are based on the equality of all parties and on good communication (Barnes & Turner, 2001, pp.83-89; Rens & Joosten, 2014, pp.148-158; Silverman & Millspaugh, 2006; Villeneuve & Hutchinson, 2012). However, it has been reported that this collaboration does not happen often or is limited, which has a negative impact on participation goals and can result in involved parties feeling dissatisfied or frustrated (Kennedy & Stewart, 2012, pp.147-155).

Recently, the EFQM (European Foundation for Quality Management) Excellence Model has been proposed in relation to education and school system (Bukovec, 2015). Organizational excellence has been defined as a method of work that brings all involved parties a level of satisfaction and increases the possibilities of long-term success. In the context of education, this is often connected with balancing the interests and needs of students, teachers, regulatory bodies, financial resources and local communities (EFQM Excellence Model, 2003).
Excellence goes beyond quality and does not mean just compliance with a certain standard. Bukovec (2015) highlights that excellence starts within an individual; this forms a basis for organizational excellence.

Excellence Model is built around eight fundamental concepts (EFQM Excellence Model, 2003). These are:

- Adding value for customers.
- Creating a sustainable future.
- Developing organizational capability.
- Harnessing creativity and innovation.
- Leading with vision, inspiration and integrity.
- Managing with agility
- Succeeding through the talent of people.
- Sustaining outstanding results.

3 Methods

Qualitative research approach was used to capture teachers' attitudes, perceptions and experience. The purpose of the study was to encourage teachers to share and reflect on their personal experiences with inclusive education in Slovenia. We also aimed to complement the results of the quantitative study that predated the current study.

Data was collected from the following sources: (1) focus interviews and (2) individual interviews. First, a pilot interview was conducted in one school. The pilot interview was not included in the final data analysis. Six schools were chosen for focus interviews and individual interviews. The selection of schools depended on the geographical region and their score on the TEIP scale, which was obtained during the quantitative phase.

From February to June 2013, researchers interviewed 6 focus groups in pairs. Each group consisted of 6 teachers who were teaching at different levels of primary school and lasted approximately 90 minutes. The first author was present during all the interviews and was leading the semi-structured discussion in 5 groups. All the interviews were audio-recorded and the interviewers also took notes.

A week later, the first author conducted individual interviews with two teachers from each focus group, a total of 12 interviews. Teachers were approached for individual interviews if (1) the author felt that they did not manage to contribute as much as they wanted to during the focus interviews and/or (2) a discrepancy was observed in their views compared to the other members of the focus group. Each individual interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and was audio-recorded.

Additional data was also collected at the schools during the visits to help build a more holistic picture of attitudes towards disability at each of the schools. Researchers made observations

of the environment and took notes about school accessibility, classroom accessibility and availability of literature on the topic of disability and people with special needs. In schools that employed a special education teacher, interviews were performed with him to gain understanding of his work and work load.

Qualitative content analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was used to analyse the interviews with the aim to develop new concepts, hypotheses and explanations that would read like a story describing the phenomenon under study. The analysis followed 6 basic steps: (1) reading and re-reading the material to get familiar with it, (2) selection of coding units, (3) open coding of the whole text, (4) choosing and defining relevant concepts and categories, (5) axial coding - comparing categories and arranging them in proposed relationships, and (6) developing the final theoretical formulation that would read like a coherent narrative.

4 Findings

Five categories pertaining to teachers' attitudes to inclusion emerged from the interviews:

1. Formal education vs. work experience
2. Readiness to cooperate with other professionals
3. Burden or challenge?
4. Different work approaches
5. Negative and positive aspects of inclusion

Since a great volume of material had been collected and analysed, we will here focus only on the analysis and discussion of the first three categories. All quotations were originally in Slovenian language. When translating into English, we tried to keep the text as close to the original as possible, however, some grammatical and vocabulary adjustments had to be made to ensure the content is comprehensible after the translation. To maintain anonymity and confidentiality, pseudonyms are used when presenting the findings.

Formal education vs. work experience

Most teachers expressed that their formal university education did not include specific topics connected to inclusion and quality education of children with special needs. Simon describes his teacher education in the following way: "*I feel that the university lives in a world of its own, separate from real school life. This means there is no systematic way of getting students familiar with knowledge that could help them when they encounter pupils who have learning disabilities or physical disabilities or behavioural issues...It bothers me that you don't get prepared for what might be waiting for you at the school."*

Consequently, most teachers feel they are not confident (enough) when it comes to the inclusion process. They try to fill the perceived gap in knowledge by attending internal and

external courses and CPD activities. Some also use self-directed learning techniques to further their knowledge on the topic. Dragica told us: "*Sometimes I go to the library and borrow a book, for example, I look for ideas on how to manage a restless class or how to work with these children. And sometimes I do find some new inspiration and then change my old way of working."*

Teachers try to implement the newly attained knowledge from different courses and self-directed learning into their daily work. One teacher told us she likes to "experiment" with different teaching methods. Most teachers recognize the importance of CPD activities and courses on inclusion, but they also emphasize these cannot compare to years of practical experience of working with children with special needs. In their opinion, work experience importantly contributes to the teacher's confidence and gives him a (positive) authority in the classroom. One interviewee also reflected that her work brings her continuous development and learning: "*Every school year is like a 9-month intense workshop. I never get the feeling that now I know everything; it's more like I'm learning again and again and again. And again and again I'm dissatisfied with the work of the previous year. So I keep what worked for me and change the things that didn't work. I learn from mistakes and I think it's really possible to develop."* (Mateja)

In the interviewees' opinion, confidence is best developed through being proactive and creative when implementing the inclusion process. Teachers also acknowledge that their role is rapidly changing: from a person who designs and implements the whole teaching process to an observer - a person who directs children towards independent learning.

Readiness to cooperate with other professionals

The challenges teachers face in their daily practice have to do with both an increased number of children with special needs in regular school programs and a great diversity of their needs and disabilities. Marjana captures this when saying: "*Since I teach maths, I really get to see a plethora of differences in children's needs, from those who have attention deficits, learning disabilities, dyscalculia, dyslexia to above-averagely talented children."* This diversity presents teachers with some unique challenges and difficulties when designing individual plans of work.

Often, teachers require guidance and assistance when developing an individual plan for a child with special needs. Teachers also seek support and advice from their colleagues and other professionals when it comes to establishing authority and confidence in the classroom. Moreover, they sometimes ask for feedback regarding their work with children with special needs. The importance of intra-professional support was expressed by Nuša: *"It is a real privilege that there are two of us in year one./...this good collaboration and working in tandem brings a special/.../new teaching approach and it often happens that we play a certain didactic game and we see the children's reaction, so we think, yes, this is the way we are going to work."*

Teachers appear to be more in favour of internal cooperation with their colleagues at the school compared to external cooperation with other experts. They generally like to discuss (1) the most appropriate ways of including a child with special needs, (2) previous experiences with inclusion, (3) individual programs for children with special needs. The need for cooperation is greatest at the beginning and/or end of the school year and in between academic terms. During these times the teachers exchange information on the progress/stagnation of the child and share their plans for activities that could support inclusion. Most teachers report a positive attitude towards cooperation, however, cooperation does not take away the need for the teacher to be confident and competent in his work routines.

In contrast, cooperation with other (external) experts and institutions appears to be inadequate. In the teachers' opinions, this is connected with: (1) unresponsiveness and lack of thoroughness on the part of other professionals when teachers ask for additional help with the child with special needs, (2) time-delays that accompany written communication.

Burden or challenge?

Based on their attitudes towards inclusion, teachers could broadly be divided into two groups. The first group constitutes of teachers who have developed negative feelings and connotations in relation to their profession. These teachers often express criticism towards the existing school system and the possibilities for inclusion of children with special needs. Also, they believe that in the current system, the children are generally stagnating. This group of interviewees experiences the inclusion process as additional burden that demands extra preparation time and CPD activities. They describe how they need to invest more time to prepare the lessons and adapt their methods of teaching and assessing. Some of them experience despair and feelings of loss at the beginning of the school year. Children's behavioural and emotional challenges exhaust and overpower them and they feel unsuccessful when they do not observe any visible improvements in their work. Teachers who perceive inclusion in a very negative way often experience difficulties dealing with children who have behavioural problems. Mihaela described them as "*destroying the everyday routine*." Lojze also told us how "*they do not make notes, don't have notebooks. They walk around the classroom and take things from other pupils or just scream. These sorts of moments take away the teacher's focus*". Teachers seem particularly negative towards children who are exhibiting disruptive behaviours as they feel that these children diminish the quality of education also for their classmates. Maja wondered: "*If the pupil doesn't even meet minimal standards and struggles all the time, this presents a big problem for teachers, how and to what degree should they be adapting.*"

The other group constitutes of teachers who accept their changing and more dynamic role. These teachers acknowledge the more dynamic arrangements of their work schedule and conclude that they have to be *"very adaptable"* to meet all the new requirements; "*we need to adapt to children's different levels,*" as described by Barbara. Some interviewees feel that at the beginning of their career when they do not have so much work experience, teaching on

different levels and in different classes can be difficult, however, they have accepted this as a positive challenge. They also perceive the inclusion of children with special needs as both a responsibility and a challenge. These teachers often express the desire to get to know children with special needs and become familiar with their abilities, strengths and weakness, so they can make their educational process more meaningful. To do that, they find it very important to obtain information from the parents. Špela explained: "*I think a lot about what the parents tell me, how they do things at home and what they're like. I reflect on that, so I can build a better picture. Of course, you don't know the parents from the start. You slowly get to know them via parent-teacher meetings, and in this way you also get to know the children better, all of them, those with and without special needs. I put a lot of emphasis on what parents tell me."* Interviewees are aware that inclusion of children with special needs requires additional preparations and tasks, so that the teaching process can be implemented to a high standard. Lojze explains that the teacher "*is expected to motivated the children and sort them out, and then the teacher can function better as well."*

5 Discussion

Slovenian teachers included in this study acknowledge that they were not sufficiently trained and educated on the topic of inclusion during their teacher training years. At the same time, they also feel that sometimes life experiences, pro-active approach and hands-on work with children are as important as formal education in developing the teacher's competencies and classroom authority. In order to be successful and satisfied, teachers need to be increasingly flexible in their role. They need to meet the various needs of children and also adapt to changing roles and responsibilities. Teachers generally recognize the need for collaboration with other professionals, however, collaboration with external professional appears to be somewhat inadequate, which is often attributed to factors relating to bureaucracy and the style of work of other professionals. Some teachers appear to be more positive about the inclusion process, and they often see it as a part of their personal development. In contrast, other teachers experience inclusion of children with special needs as an additional burden that contributes to their general dissatisfaction with the existing school system and society as a whole.

Findings about the inclusion process in Slovenia reflect many of the findings of previous studies from other countries. There appears to be an international trend that the existing models of teaching and education do not always adapt to changing circumstances and remain rooted in a medical approach that focuses on deficit (Engelbrecht et al., 2015, pp.1-10). However, external factors are not the only ones affecting the inclusion process. Teachers themselves vary in their perceptions of their teaching realities. As demonstrated in this study, they could robustly be divided into those who are generally more positive and those who are generally more negative. Jordan, Glenn and McGhie-Richmond (2010, pp. 259-266) talk about two opposite approaches to teaching (teaching in general as well as teaching children with special needs) that relate to the teacher's beliefs and attitudes. The first approach is determined by pathognomonic attitudes that describe disability as internal, fixed and pathological. Teachers with prevailing pathognomonic views attribute the reasons for the

child's stagnation to factors that relate to the child, his parents or family. These teachers generally spend less time trying to include the child with special needs and they prefer models of practice that segregate and are in favour of a pull-out approach. The second approach is focused around interventionist attitudes. These teachers are of the opinion that disability is, at least partially, a sociological phenomenon that is often caused by the environment which is created for people without special needs. They feel personally responsible for the inclusion of children with special needs and want to create an environment in which all children are able to participate. Although the two belief systems can be intertwined, only approximately 20 percent of teachers hold interventionist believes. These two opposite attitudes (pathognomonic vs interventionist) could help explain the finding of this study of two groups of teachers which appear to be diametrically opposite.

Furthermore, it appears that attitudes towards inclusion and children with special needs might have implications that expand beyond the inclusion process. A preliminary study conducted by Glenn (2007) found that there was a connection between the teacher's interactions (both with children with special needs and others), their teaching style and their beliefs about the abilities of children with special needs. Glenn (2007) concluded that the teacher's epistemological beliefs and their attitudes towards disability might be connected with the overall quality of their teaching. The most successful teachers were able to include all children, spent more time with children with special needs and encouraged critical thinking. This goes against the general belief that inclusive teaching limits the teacher in his work with children who do not have special needs (or are even above-average in their academic abilities). This has also been expressed by Malinen et al. (2013, pp. 34-44) and Engelbrecht et al. (2015, pp. 1-10) who emphasize that inclusion means quality education for everyone and should not be too different from the existing school model. Moreover, research showed that educational systems recognized as world's best include all children well (Barber & Mourshed, 2007). When teachers implement interventionist work methods efficiently, *all* children benefit from it. This aspect and potential of inclusion has not been widely recognized by Slovenian teachers included in the study. Teachers frequently separated the inclusion of children with special needs from other teaching practices and some saw it as a burden they were not fully equipped to manage. Jordan, Glenn and McGhie-Richmond (2010, pp. 259-266) acknowledge that it is not easy to develop interventionist attitudes and high quality inclusive methods of work. Although the Slovenian quantitative study (Gaber et al., 2016) showed a generally positive attitude towards inclusion, this qualitative study did not completely confirm this. It revealed some subtle complexities and struggles that are faced by both teachers and children and that need to be addressed if the inclusion model is to be successful.

The findings of this study also suggest that, after finishing their teaching course, teachers often do not feel ready to face a class that can include a child with special needs. The sense of self-efficacy and confidence get build over time. Loreman, Sharma and Frolin (2013) describe the 'head-heart-hands' triad, which characterizes a good quality inclusive teacher. The 'head' represents cognitive knowledge and theoretical education. Moral and ethical principles represent the 'heart' component. And 'hands' stand for the practical and technical skills that are required to implement inclusive education.

Another difficulty Slovenian teachers expressed was the cooperation with external professionals. Many barriers to good collaboration have been described in literature and the most common ones include:

1. Ambiguity regarding roles and responsibilities (Helena Hemmingsson et al., 2007, pp. 383-398).

2. Professionals not experiencing each other as equal partners and having different theoretical and philosophical backrounds, often due to being educated within different systems (Bose & Hinojosa, 2008, pp. 289-297; Silverman & Millspaugh, 2006).

3. Organisational barriers (Helena Hemmingsson et al., 2007, pp. 383-398).

4. A lack of time for formal communication, e.g. strategic meetings (Bose & Hinojosa, 2008, pp. 289-297; Nochajski, 2002, 101-112).

All these barriers can inhibit the implementation of modern interdisciplinary models of practice. In the Slovenian example, organizational barriers and ambiguity regarding the other professionals' roles, scope of practice and approaches of work were most commonly mentioned. These barriers could also prevent the full implementation of the Excellence Model in education and limit the transition from quality education to excellence (EFQM Excellence Model, 2003).

6 Conclusion

Both organizational and personal factors have been identified as limiting the process of inclusion and affecting full participation of children with special needs in Slovenian primary schools. Teachers' attitudes towards inclusion were not homogenous and there were many different experiences and understandings of the process. While some teachers appeared to be positive about the inclusion process, others experienced it as an additional professional burden. Lack of education and experience contributed to the feelings of being overwhelmed. The need for collaboration was generally recognized, but especially cooperation with external professionals did not always meet the demands of the inclusion process.

This study was the first qualitative study of the inclusion process in Slovenia. It This study highlighted some important aspects of the inclusion process and linked it with studies from other countries. It has been recognized that good quality education involves all students and requires ongoing development and a focus on the future. To develop excellence in education, some deeply rooted patterns of thinking and working will probably need to be altered first (Bukovec, 2015). Successful inclusion could importantly contribute to a more harmonious society that could support all individuals and help them thrive regardless of their backgrounds and different abilities.

This qualitative study included teachers from one geographical region of Slovenia. Although we did not aim to make any generalisations, it could be useful to expand the sample to other regions in order to capture different collaboration patterns that might be established in other regions and municipalities.

The findings of this study suggest that future research should explore the development and implementation of relevant teaching programs and courses that could support teachers and provide continuous development in the context of contemporary Slovenian environment. A better inter-professional network also needs to be established, so that children with special needs as well as teachers teaching them can be adequately supported.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Povzetek

Raziskovalno vprašanje (RV): Kakšen je odnos slovenskih osnovno-šolskih učiteljev do inkluzije otrok s posebnimi potrebami v redne šolske programe?
Namen: Namen študije je bil vzpodbuditi učitelje, da delijo svoje osebne izkušnje in refleksije, kar bi lahko pripomoglo k razvoju bolj učinkovitih metod dela.
Metoda: To je bila kvalitativna študija, ki je vključevala fokusne in individualne, pol-strukturirane intervjuje. Za analizo materiala je bila uporabljena kvalitativna tematska analiza.
Rezultati: Iz analize je izšlo pet kategorij. Ta članek se osredotoča na tri kategorije, ki opisujejo delitev učiteljev v dve skupini glede na njihov odnos do inkluzije in otrok s posebnimi potrebami.
Organizacija: Rezultati raziskave nakazujejo, da slovenski šolski sistem še ni povsem prešel na inkluzivni model dela. Učitelji ne dobijo dovolj podpore in niso ustrezno izobraženi za inkluzijo, primanjkuje pa tudi medprofesionalne podpore.
Družba: Inkluzija otrok s posebnimi potrebami je odraz kakovosti celotnega izobraževalnega sistema in družbe kot celote.
Originalnost: To je bila prva študija v slovenskem prostoru**,** ki je proučevala odnos učiteljev do inkluzije. Ta študija je poglobila je razumevanje tega fenomena odnosa učiteljev do inkluzije in rezultate povezala z drugimi mednarodnimi študijami o inkluziji.
Omejitve/ nadaljnje raziskovanje: Nadaljnje raziskave bi se lahko osredotočile na razvoj in implementacijo programov izobraževanja za učitelje in na razvoj podporne mreže, ki bi temeljila na sodelovanju znotraj inkluzivnega modela dela.

Keywords: otroci s posebnimi potrebami, inkluzija, izobraževanje, odnos učiteljev, kvalitativna študija, modeli dela.

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