

ATTITUDES OF PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS TOWARDS INCLUSION OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN MAINSTREAM EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS IN PRIMARY SCHOOL

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Abstract

The article explores the attitudes of primary school teachers towards the inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream educational programs in primary schools. The theoretical part discusses the requirements of the new school system imposed on teachers. The empirical part presents a study on the attitudes of primary school teachers towards the inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream primary schools and on whether there are differences in attitudes between younger and older teachers. Descriptive and inferential methods of empirical pedagogical research were used in this paper. The data was collected through an online questionnaire filled out by primary school teachers across Slovenia. The study results showed that all teachers, regardless of age, feel that they are not sufficiently trained to work with children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). At the same time, they agree that they did not acquire enough skills during their undergraduate studies to work with these children. Furthermore, the teachers feel they do not have enough experience working with these children. At the same time, they agree that the children with SEND should be included in programs specifically tailored to their needs and not in mainstream primary school programs. Additionally, the results have shown that teachers think it is necessary to set different educational goals for children with SEND than for other students. The teachers feel that working with children with SEND means additional work. However, they think that the inclusion of children with SEND in mainstream educational programs is not assessed as problematic. They feel that other students are also specifically addressed in the class with children with SEND. However, older teachers than younger ones believe they did not acquire enough knowledge during their undergraduate studies.

Keywords: *attitudes of primary school teachers, children with special needs, inclusion*

INTRODUCTION

In 2003, the Government of the Republic of Slovenia adopted the Rules on Amendments to the Placement of Children with Special Needs Act. A major problem in implementing these changes is the inability of teachers to work with children with special needs (Opara, 2005). Namely, teachers do not have experience working with children with special needs, which is particularly true for older teachers, as they did not acquire the experience during their undergraduate studies (Schmidt, 2001). We conclude, therefore, that getting used to these changes is the most difficult for older teachers, who must learn to follow the new guidelines. Experts note that teachers do not have positive attitudes towards the inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream educational programs (Schmidt, 2001), especially those who did not acquire sufficient knowledge during their mainstream education (i. e., older teachers compared to younger ones) (Schmidt 2000, 444). Based on these findings, we want to study the attitudes of primary school teachers towards the inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream educational programs and whether there are differences between younger and older teachers. In addition, we are also interested in how qualified they feel about working with children with special needs and whether their perceived competence is linked to the knowledge and skills acquired in undergraduate studies.

THEORETICAL PART

Changing of the school system

In 2003, the Government of the Republic of Slovenia adopted the Rules on Amendments to the Orientation of Children with Special Needs Act. The rules specify the orientation of children with special needs in primary school mainstream educational programs in greater detail. It is these changes in the school system that present a challenge for the teachers, as working with children with special needs poses a risk to them on a motivational and professional level. The implementation and success of these changes largely depend on teachers, their perception of their own role (responsibility for the children with SEND), the possibility (feeling) of cooperation, peer support, and motivation to work (Razdevšek Pučko, 2000, p. 174- 175).

The new system also brings new changes. Indeed, getting used to these changes is the most difficult for older teachers. Namely, they find that teachers have no experience and did not acquire additional knowledge for working with children with SEND even during their undergraduate studies (Schmidt, 2001). Marentič Požarnik (2003) also says that the undergraduate education system has been calling for solid improvements for years due to the lack of special pedagogy subjects.

The changes or the new system require teachers to have positive attitudes and values towards the inclusion of children with SEND in the mainstream educational programs of primary school. It is crucial for the teacher to be aware of their own views on children with SEND and to reduce any possible prejudices, to be aware of the strong influence of their own expectations on these children, and to focus on a positive evaluation of each child's strengths (Marentič Požarnik, 2003, p. 110).

Most teachers see additional work, a sense of responsibility for the children with SEND, and incompetence when working with children with SEND (Destovnik, 2000). Teachers still show resistance to the inclusion of children with SEND, mainly because they believe that other students are not specifically addressed in the class in which a child with SEND is placed and because of the lack of experience (Schmidt, 2001). Research to date has shown that teachers do not have positive attitudes towards the inclusion of children with SEND in mainstream primary school curricula, that teachers do not want to teach children with SEND, and that their presence is assessed as problematic (Schmidt, 2001). However, Leyser and colleagues (1994 in Schmidt, 2000, 444) find that those teachers who had more special pedagogy content or classes during their education, i. e. younger teachers compared to older ones, have more positive attitudes.

METHOD

The main purpose was to determine the attitudes of primary school teachers towards the inclusion of children with SEND in the mainstream educational programs of primary school and to determine whether there are differences between younger and older primary school teachers.

Descriptive and inferential methods of empirical pedagogical research were used in this survey.

The data was processed using the computer program SPSS. We used the basics:

- Descriptive statistics (opinion of primary school teachers on competence for work with children with SEND and assessment of competence; experience of teachers working with children with SEND; acquired knowledge regarding children with SEND during undergraduate studies; opinion on the inclusion of children with SEND in adapted programs; opinion on setting different learning objectives for children with SEND; views on the inclusion of children with SEND in mainstream primary schools).
- Analysis of variance – ANOVA (differences based on the age of primary school teachers).
- The Chi-Square test of independence (differences based on the age of primary school teachers).

- The independent samples t-Test (differences based on self-assessed qualification).
- Pearson correlation coefficient (r) (correlation of experience gained working with children with SEND and the opinion on inclusion in adapted programs for the children with SEND).

Data collection techniques and instruments

A questionnaire was used to collect data. First, the questionnaire includes two closed-ended questions (age and the level of self-assessed competence for working with children with SEND). It continues with a five-point Likert scale which includes one statement. This is followed by a five-point Likert scale, which consists of eight statements (teachers' experience in working with children with SEND; statements on mainstream and additional education for working with children with SEND; statements about the rules on Orientation of Children with Special Needs Act; statements about their views on the inclusion of children with SEND in mainstream primary school programs).

Participants

The survey included 63 primary school teachers in Slovenia, of which the majority (36.5%) were aged between 36 and 43, slightly less (34.9%) aged over 44, and the least (28.6%) aged up to 35 years, i.e., 13 (20.6%) primary school teachers with up to 7 years of service, 21 (33.3%) with 8 to 16 years of service, 9 (14.3%) with 17 to 25 years of service, and 20 (31.7%) primary school teachers with over 26 years of service were included.

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

Qualification of primary school teachers to work with children with SEND

Table 1. Number and structural percentage of primary school teachers in qualification for work with children with SEND according to age

Age Group	Qualifications for working with children with SEND		Total
	Yes	No	
Up to 35 years old	2	16	18
	11.10%	88.90%	100%
36 to 43 years old	3	20	23
	13.00%	87.00%	100%

Over 44 years old	6	16	22
	27.30%	72.70%	100%
Total	11	52	63
	17.50%	82.50%	100%
Result of The Chi-Square test	$\chi^2=2.200;g=2;P=0.333$		

The Chi-Square test result ($\chi^2 = 2.200$; $g = 2$; $P = 0.333$) shows no statistically significant differences in primary school teachers' self-assessed qualifications and ability to work with children with SEND based on their age. The data in Table 3 show that the majority (82.5%) of RP teachers believe they are not qualified to work with children with SEND, while the minority (17.5%) believe they are qualified to work with them. Thus, we accept the hypothesis that primary school teachers believe they are not sufficiently trained to work with children with SEND. However, the hypothesis that more senior teachers feel they are not qualified to work with children with SEND is rejected.

Table 2. The ANOVA result of the study of differences in the ability assessment of RP teachers to work with OPP according to age

Age Group	n	\bar{x}	s	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances			ANOVA		
				F	g_1	g_2	P	F	P
Up to 35 years old	18	3.11	0.58	2.709	2	60	0.08	0.993	0.376
36 to 43 years old	23	2.96	0.37						
Over 44 years old	22	3.18	0.66						
Total	63	3.08	0.55						

The assumption of homogeneity of variances ($F = 2.709$; $g_1 = 2$; $g_2 = 60$; $P = 0.08$) is justified. The variance analysis test ($F = 0.993$; $P = 0.376$) shows no statistically significant differences in the assessment of the ability of primary school teachers to work with children with SEND based on age. Table 4 shows that all primary school teachers assessed their ability to work with the children with SEND as partially qualified. We reject the hypothesis that older primary school teachers assess their ability to work with children with SEND as more inadequate than the younger teachers.

Experiences of primary school teachers working with children with SEND

Table 3. ANOVA Result of the study on differences between older and younger primary school teachers about having insufficient experience in working with children with SEND

Age Group	n	\bar{X}	s	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				ANOVA	
				F	g ₁	g ₂	P	F	P
Up to 35 years old	18	2.22	1.17	0.152	2	60	0.859	0.058	0.943
36 to 43 years old	23	2.22	1.04						
Over 44 years old	22	2.32	1.09						
Total	63	2.25	1.08						

The assumption of homogeneity of variances is justified ($F = 0.152$; $g_1 = 2$; $g_2 = 60$; $P = 0.859$). The analysis of variance analysis ($F = 0.058$; $P = 0.943$) shows no statistically significant differences among primary school teachers of different age groups as they agree that they do not have enough experience to work with children with SEND. Table 5 shows that all RP teachers agree ($= 2.25$) they have too little experience to work with children with SEND. We reject the hypothesis that older primary school teachers agree to a greater extent that they have too little experience to work with children with SEND than younger teachers. Meanwhile, the hypothesis that primary school teachers agree they don't have enough experience to work with children with SEND is confirmed.

Table 4. The outcome of the Pearson's correlation coefficient for the claims that teachers have too little experience and that my RIP should have been included in tailored programs and not mainstream primary school programs

Claims	\bar{X}	S	Correlation	
			r	P
I do not have enough experience to work with children with SEND	2.19	1.06	0.875	0.000
Children with SEND should be included in adapted programs	2.25	1.08		

Pearson's correlation coefficient ($r = 0.875$; $P = 0.000$) indicates a high and statistically significant correlation between teachers' agreement that they have too little experience and that

children with SEND should be included in adapted programs rather than mainstream primary school programs. Teachers who agree that they have too little experience also agree that the children with SEND should be included in adapted programs and not in mainstream primary school programs. Therefore, we accept the hypothesis that teachers who agree that they have too little experience also agree that children with SEND should be included in adapted programs rather than mainstream primary school programs.

We find that most teachers agree that they have too little experience working with children with SEND. However, among these, there are no differences according to age. In addition, the agreement of primary school teachers that they have too little experience is also highly linked to the agreement that children with SEND should be redirected to adapted programs rather than attend mainstream primary school programs. The results of our research are therefore consistent with the results of Schmidt's (2001) research that teachers still resist the inclusion of children with SEND, which is due to their lack of experience, among other things.

Education of primary school teachers in working with children with SEND

Table 5. Number and structural percentage of primary school teachers by age groups, depending on whether they agree that they have acquired sufficient skills to work with children with SEND during their undergraduate studies

Age	Acquired skills for working with children with SEND during undergraduate studies					Total
	I completely agree	I agree	I can't decide	I disagree	I completely disagree	
Up to 35 years old	0	0	2	10	6	18
	0.00%	0.00%	3.2%	15.9%	9.5%	28.6%
36 to 43 years old	1	2	3	11	6	23
	1.6%	3.2%	4.8%	17.5%	9.5%	36.5%
Over 44 years old	1	1	0	19	1	22
	1.6%	1.50%	0.00%	30.2%	1.6%	34.9%
Total	2	3	5	40	13	63
	3.2%	4.80%	7.90%	63.5%	20.6%	100%
Result of The Chi-Square test	$\chi^2=16.318;g=8;P=0.038$					

The Chi-Square test result with the likelihood ratio ($\chi^2 = 16.318$; $g = 8$; $P = 0.038$) shows statistically significant differences between younger and older teachers in terms of agreeing that they acquired sufficient knowledge to work with children with SEND during their undergraduate studies. Table 7 shows that the majority (63.5%) of teachers do not agree with the statement that they acquired sufficient knowledge to work with children with SEND during their full-time study, while slightly fewer (20.6%) completely disagree. Among those that did not agree with the statement, there were 19 of the oldest teachers (30.2%), i. e. those over 44 years of age, 11 (17.5%) teachers aged 34 to 43, and 10 (15, 9%) teachers up to 35 years of age. Therefore, we also accept the hypothesis that there are differences between older and younger teachers, depending on whether they agree they acquired sufficient knowledge to work with children with SEND during undergraduate studies. The results of our research are consistent with the findings of Schmidt (2001) that older teachers did not acquire additional skills to work with children with SEND during their undergraduate studies.

Table 6. The result of the t-test for independent samples about the acquired knowledge of primary school teachers during undergraduate studies based on the opinion of the ability to work with children with SEND

Competency to work with children with SEND	n	\bar{x}	S	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		Independent Samples t-test		
				F	P	t	g	2P
Yes	11	3.36	0.92	2.582	0.113	-2.48	61	0.016
No	52	4.06	0.83					

The assumption of homogeneity of variances ($F = 2.582$; $P = 0.113$) is justified. The result of the t-test for independent samples ($t = -2.48$; $g = 61$; $2P = 0.016$) showed that there are statistically significant differences in terms of the agreement on experience gained during undergraduate study between the teachers who consider themselves qualified for work and the teachers who consider that they are not qualified for work. Table 8 shows that those teachers who feel that they are not sufficiently trained to work with children with SEND do not agree to a greater extent ($= 4.06$) that they acquired sufficient knowledge to work with children with SEND during the full-time study than primary school teachers who consider that they are sufficiently qualified to work with children with SEND ($= 3.36$). Therefore, we accept the hypothesis that teachers who are more qualified to work are more likely to agree that they acquired sufficient knowledge during their undergraduate studies to work with children with SEND than the teachers who feel they are not sufficiently qualified to work with children with SEND.

The results of our research show that most teachers disagree that they acquired enough knowledge to work with children with SEND during their undergraduate studies. In addition, it is largely older teachers who disagree. We find that primary school teachers who think they are qualified also agree to a greater extent that they acquired enough knowledge to work with children with SEND during their full-time study than the teachers who think they are not qualified. Schmidt (2001) also notes that teachers, during undergraduate studies, did not acquire additional knowledge to work with children with SEND (Schmidt, 2001). In addition, Marentič Požarnik (2003) suggested that the education system has been calling for significant improvements for years due to the lack of special pedagogy classes.

The attitude of primary school teachers towards including children with special needs into mainstream primary school programs

We were interested to see if primary school teachers agree that children with SEND require different educational goals and what the difference between younger and older teachers is.

Table 7. The result of the variance analysis for researching the differences in attitudes of primary school teachers regarding their agreement with setting different educational goals for children with SEND as opposed to other learners in class according to age group

Age group	n	\bar{x}	s	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				Variance analysis	
				F	g_1	g_2	P	F	P
Up to 35 years old	18	2.67	1.14	0.711	2	60	0.495	0.702	0.500
36 to 43 years old	23	2.39	1.08						
Over 44 years old	22	2.27	0.98						
Total	63	2.43	1.06						

The assumption of homogeneity of variances ($F=0.711; g_1=2; g_2=60; P=0.495$) is justified. The test of variance analysis ($F=0.702; P=0.500$) shows no statistically significant differences regarding their agreement with setting different educational goals for children with SEND as opposed to most other learners. Table 9 shows that teachers generally ($\bar{x}=2.43$) agree that different educational goals must be set for children with SEND. We accept our hypothesis that teachers agree that those different educational goals must be set for children with SEND as opposed to other learners. However, we reject our hypothesis that older teachers agree with this to a lower degree compared to younger teachers.

Table 8. The result of the variance analysis for researching the differences in attitudes of teachers regarding the notion that the inclusion of children with SEND into mainstream primary school educational programs represents additional work according to age group

Age group	n	\bar{x}	s	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				Variance analysis	
				F	g ₁	g ₂	P	F	P
Up to 35 years old	18	1.56	0.51	0.782	2	60	0.462	0.106	0.900
36 to 43 years old	23	1.48	0.59						
Over 44 years old	22	1.50	0.51						
Total	63	1.51	0.54						

The assumption of homogeneity of variances ($F=0.782;g_1=2;g_2=60;P=0.462$) is justified. The test of variance ($F=0.106; P=0.900$) analysis shows no statistically significant differences in teachers' attitudes regarding the notion that the inclusion of children with SEND into mainstream primary school educational programs represents additional work. We notice that primary school teachers generally very much agree ($\bar{x}=1,51$) that the inclusion of children with SEND into mainstream primary school educational programs represents additional work for them. We partially reject our hypothesis, as we cannot claim anything regarding the differences between the age groups of primary school teachers. However, we determine that everyone very much agrees that the inclusion of children with SEND into mainstream primary school programs represents additional work for a primary school teacher. The analysis results partially match Jelačić's research (in Destovnik, 2000), who came to the same conclusions that working with children with SEND represents additional work for teachers.

Table 9. The result of the variance analysis for researching the differences in attitudes of teachers regarding the notion that other learners are treated disadvantageously in those classrooms where a child with SEND is present according to age group

Age group	n	\bar{x}	s	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				Variance analysis	
				F	g ₁	g ₂	P	F	P
Up to 35 years old	18	3.39	0.85	1.555	2	60	0.220	1.112	0.336
36 to 43 years old	23	2.96	1.07						
Over 44 years old	22	2.86	1.46						
Total	63	3.05	1.17						

The assumption of homogeneity of variances ($F=1.555;g_1=2;g_2=60;P=0.220$) is justified. The test of variance ($F=1.112; P=0.336$) analysis shows no statistically significant differences in attitudes of primary school teachers regarding the notion that other learners are treated disadvantageously in those classrooms where a child with SEND is present. We notice that teachers could not generally agree ($\bar{x} = 3,05$) if they agree or disagree with the statement. We reject the hypothesis that primary school teachers agree that other learners are treated disadvantageously in those classrooms where a child with SEND is present. Furthermore, we reject our hypothesis that younger teachers agree with this to a lesser degree compared to older teachers, as we cannot claim anything about the age differences of teachers regarding the notion that other learners are treated disadvantageously in those classrooms where a child with SEND is present.

Table 10. The result of the variance analysis for researching the differences in attitudes of teachers regarding the notion that the presence of a child with SEND in mainstream primary school programs is problematic for other children according to age

Age group	n	\bar{x}	s	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				Variance analysis	
				F	g_1	g_2	P	F	P
Up to 35 years old	18	3.78	1.00	0.215	2	60	0.0807	1.738	0.185
36 to 43 years old	23	3.13	1.22						
Over 44 years old	22	3.41	1.05						
Total	63	3.41	1.12						

The assumption of homogeneity of variances ($F=0.215;g_1=2;g_2=60;P=0.0807$) is justified. The test of variance ($F=1,738; P=0,185$) analysis shows that there are no statistically significant differences between the attitudes of younger and older primary school teachers regarding the notion that the presence of a child with SEND in mainstream primary school programs is problematic for other children. Table 10 indicates that teachers under the age of 35 mostly ($\bar{x} = 3.75$) disagree with this. The results of our study do not match Schmidt's study results (2001) which state that primary school teachers consider the inclusion of children with SEND into mainstream educational programs as problematic and that learners in such classrooms are treated disadvantageously.

CONCLUSION

The goal of our article was to explore the attitudes of primary school teachers towards the inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream educational programs in primary schools and to determine whether there are differences between older and younger teachers.

We have concluded that most primary school teachers are not trained to work with children with SEND, and there are no differences between younger and older teachers since both younger and older primary school teachers deem that they are partially qualified to work with children with SEND. All primary school teachers assess that children with SEND in mainstream primary school educational programs represent additional work for them and that children with SEND require different educational goals than most children. Teachers qualified to work with children with SEND assess that they acquired enough knowledge during their undergraduate studies to work with children with SEND.

Additional formal and informal education and an upgrade of undergraduate studies with classes from the field of special pedagogics are required for teachers to change their attitudes towards the inclusion of children with SEND into mainstream educational primary school programs. Thus, primary school teachers would acquire additional knowledge for working with children with SEND and, consequently, be more qualified. Therefore, they would most likely alter their attitudes to more positive ones as they would have more knowledge regarding the work with children with SEND, and children with SEND would not represent additional work for them.

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STAVOVI UČITELJA RAZREDNE NASTAVE PREMA UKLJUČIVANJU DJECE S POSEBNIM POTREBAMA U REDOVNE ODGOJNO-OBRAZOVNE PROGRAME U OSNOVNOJ ŠKOLI

Sažetak

Članak istražuje stavove učitelja razredne nastave prema uključivanju djece s posebnim potrebama u redovne odgojno-obrazovne programe u osnovnoj školi. U teorijskom dijelu predstavljeni su zahtjevi novog školskog sustava za učitelje, a empirijski dio obuhvaća istraživanje o stavovima učitelja razredne nastave prema uključivanju djece s posebnim potrebama u redovnu osnovnu školu te postoje li razlike u stavovima između mlađih i starijih učitelja. U članku je upotrijebljena deskriptivna i inferencijalna metoda empirijskog pedagoškog istraživanja. Podatci su prikupljeni internetskim upitnikom koji su ispunili učitelji razredne nastave diljem Slovenije. Rezultati istraživanja pokazali su da svi učitelji, bez obzira na dob, smatraju da nisu dovoljno osposobljeni za rad s djecom s posebnim potrebama (DPP) te se slažu da tijekom preddiplomskog studija nisu stekli dovoljno znanja za rad s takvom djecom; da imaju premalo iskustva za rad s njima i istodobno se slažu da bi DPP trebala biti uključena u prilagođene programe, a ne u redovne programe osnovnih škola; da je za DPP potrebno postaviti drugačije odgojno-obrazovne ciljeve; da rad s DPP za njih znači dodatni rad; da uključenost DPP u redovne odgojno-obrazovne programe ne smatraju problematičnim te da su u razredu s DPP također odgovarajuće postupali s drugim učenicima. Više starijih učitelja smatra da nisu stekli dovoljno znanja tijekom preddiplomskog studija.

Ključne riječi: *djeca s posebnim potrebama, inkluzija, stavovi učitelja razredne nastave*

