

# WORKING WITH STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS: VIEWS AND EXPERIENCES OF GEOGRAPHY TEACHERS

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## Abstract

In recent times characterised by rapid changes in knowledge, technology and also in values systems, children and adolescents with special educational needs have taken on a different place and role in the world compared to the past. Along with these changes, when it comes to people with special educational needs the ideas of integration, normalisation and, more recently, of inclusion have emerged and borne fruit. Through a qualitative pilot study we aimed to determine how geography teachers who teach in primary and secondary schools in Slovenia evaluate their own ability to work with students with special educational needs and garner their previous experience doing so. Geography teachers are aware of the importance of their tasks and accept them with full responsibility although they are critical about their own competencies. Among the main shortcomings of the current work in the inclusive school teachers mention an excessive number of pupils with special needs since the involvement of more than two pupils with different special needs can have a significant impact on their ability to achieve high quality teaching standards.

**Keywords:** student, teacher, geography lessons, special educational needs, education

## I INTRODUCTION

The term children/adolescents or persons with special educational needs (SEN) covers all those that require adjustments and assistance in their education for either a short or long period of time. Children with SEN are all children who have barriers, deficiencies, difficulties, problems and disorders when it comes to movement, perception, speech, cognitive processes, emotions, behaviour and learning (Bela knjiga o ...,

1995). Zakon o osnovni šoli (*The Elementary School Act*, 2006) defines children with SEN as those that are gifted as well as those with learning difficulties due to various reasons. The integration of children and adolescents with SEN into the regular school system represents a big step towards fully integrating them in society. Since it is an extremely heterogeneous group of young people, it is impossible to utilise the same teaching approaches, materials and learning aids for everyone, for there is no set procedure when dealing with this population. As a result, teachers face an extremely challenging task that requires a lot of knowledge, flexibility and understanding on their part. In 2012 amendments to Article 11 (education of gifted and talented students), Article 12 (education of students with special educational needs) and Article 12a (education of students with learning difficulties) of the Elementary School Act (Zakon o spremembah ..., 2011) came into effect. The Act defines gifted and talented students as “[those] who demonstrate significantly above-average thinking abilities or outstanding achievements in various school subjects, in the arts or sport. Schools provide these students with adequate conditions for their education, to this end they adapt the content, methods and forms of instruction and enable them to be included in additional classes, other forms of individual and group instruction and other types of activities” (Zakon o spremembah ..., 2011, pp. 11317-11318). Students with SEN are students who “need adjusted implementation of elementary schooling programmes with additional expert assistance or adjusted programmes of primary schooling, or, in other words, special educational programmes. These students are, based on different types and degrees of deficiencies, difficulties or disorders, categorised in the *Act governing the placement of children with special educational needs*” (Zakon o spremembah ..., 2011, p. 11318). Students with learning difficulties are identified as students “who, without adjusted methods and forms of classwork, would find it difficult to attain standard knowledge levels. Schools adapt methods and forms of classwork for such students and provide them with supplementary lessons and other forms of individual and group assistance” (Zakon o spremembah ..., 2011, p. 11318). The placement of children, adolescents and adults with SEN as well as determinations on approaches to and forms of education are governed by the *Placement of Children with Special Needs Act* (Zakon o usmerjanju otrok ..., 2011). It defines children with SEN as “children with intellectual disabilities, blind and partially sighted children or children with impaired visual functions, deaf and hearing impaired children, children with speech defects, children with mobility impairments, children with long-term illnesses, children with specific learning difficulties, children with autistic disorders as well as children with emotional and behavioural problems who need adjusted implementation of education programmes with additional expert assistance or adjusted educational programs, i.e. special education programmes” (Zakon o usmerjanju otrok ..., 2011, p. 8425).

Table 1: Educational characteristics of children with SEN.

SPECIAL NEEDS	CHARACTERISTICS
Children with intellectual disabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Certain impairments in mental functioning and skills, such as communication, self-care and social skills.</li> <li>• Basic learning abilities are slower, lower than would be expected for their age.</li> <li>• Intellectual disabilities can be mild, moderate, serious or severe.</li> <li>• When it comes to mild intellectual disabilities, the primary issue regarding children's learning difficulties is the traditional attainment of prescribed knowledge that schools with equivalent educational standards expect. They are able to complete school programmes with lower educational standards. They learn basic vocational skills and knowledge and in adulthood they are relatively well socially adjusted and are essentially able to take care of themselves.</li> <li>• With moderate, serious and severe intellectual disabilities, the disorders are so severe that individuals, with rare exceptions, are almost incapable of functioning independently.</li> </ul>
Blind and visually impaired children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Slovenian law concerning children with special needs has since 2000, when it was adopted, partly taken into account differences between the blind and visually impaired when it comes to the issue of technological aids and adaptations to spaces, but not in the provision of technical assistance or when it comes to attaining special skills and knowledge.</li> <li>• Blind children need a variety of additional expert assistance and support that can compensate for their lack of vision.</li> </ul>
Deaf and hearing impaired children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They are a heterogeneous population of people with disabilities that have to be dealt with selectively, or even individually, depending on the time, quality and degree of hearing impairment and abilities for spoken and social communication.</li> <li>• Special attention needs to be paid to children with hearing loss who require adjusted conditions for their optimal development and functioning at school.</li> <li>• Deaf children cannot receive information via the auditory pathway, their mother tongue is sign language.</li> <li>• If a child's auditory pathway is open and supported by a cochlear implant, it is likely that the child will be able to receive information through the auditory pathway and develop speech.</li> </ul>
Children with speech and language disorders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They have difficulties in acquiring and understanding information as well as expressing themselves verbally, though not as a result of hearing loss.</li> <li>• Disorders are reflected in understanding of speech and spoken-language expression, on a spectrum from slight delay to speech not developing.</li> <li>• Specific disorders in understanding, structuring, processing and expression are also reflected in the conflict between verbal and nonverbal abilities.</li> <li>• Secondary effects of spoken-language communication disorders are also reflected in reading and writing as well as in learning on the whole. Functional knowledge of reading and writing can be impaired on a spectrum from a slight lag to illiteracy.</li> </ul>
Mobility impaired children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They have congenital or acquired impairments, injuries of the locomotor system, central or peripheral nervous system.</li> <li>• Mobility impairment is reflected in forms of functional and movement disorders.</li> </ul>

SPECIAL NEEDS	CHARACTERISTICS
Children with long-term illnesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chronic disorders and illnesses that hinder school work. A long-term illness is one that is not cured within three months.</li> </ul>
Children with certain learning deficiencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Due to known or unknown disorders in the functioning of the central nervous system, developmental lags are seen in connection with attentiveness, memory, thinking, coordination and communication.</li> <li>• In the development of social and emotional skills marked difficulties are revealed in reading, writing, spelling and arithmetic skills.</li> <li>• Deficiencies last a lifetime and influence learning and behaviour.</li> <li>• Difficulties in communicating with their peers, clumsy when using stationary (pens, scissors, etc.), they are slow following instructions and carrying out routine tasks as well as have difficulty in temporal and spatial orientation.</li> </ul>
Children with behavioural and emotional disorders, who need adjusted implementation of educational programmes with additional expert assistance or adjusted educational programmes, or in other words, special education programmes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anti-social behaviour that is intense, repetitive and sustained and is also associated with a failure to integrate socially.</li> <li>• The child's anti-social behaviour is often characterised by symptoms including aggressive behaviour, autoaggressive behaviour, alcohol and drug abuse, destruction of other people's property, running away from home and emotional disorders.</li> </ul>

Source: Jošt, 2010, pp. 13–17.

Since this is an extremely heterogeneous group of young people, it is impossible to choose the same teaching processes and the same learning and teaching materials for all. There is no dominant process in the treatment of this population. As a result, teachers are before an extremely challenging task that requires a lot of knowledge, understanding and adaptation. After reviewing the theoretical bases, the paper focuses on the results of the survey among teachers of geography on their qualifications and experience in educational work with pupils/students with special needs in geography lessons.

## 2 INTEGRATION OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS IN THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS

Integration of children with SEN into mainstream classes was formalised in Slovenia in 1996 through the Elementary School Act and in 2000 through the Placement of Children with Special Needs Act. In particular, the Act regulates the placement of subjects in a variety of programmes, determines the procedures of placements and the work procedures of the expert committees responsible for placement decisions, as well as investigates and determines possibilities for placement of children with SEN in educational programmes. Integration of children with SEN among peers without SEN enables them to develop their capabilities, while also acknowledging differences and disorders that persist throughout their lives (Kranjc, 2011).

In the literature different terms have been used by authors to denote the placement of children with SEN in mainstream educational institutions. Among the most frequently cited are integration and inclusion, which until not long ago, particularly before 2000, were understood by many as synonyms, since it was considered they represent the same ideas, practices and objectives. Today, most authors make a distinction between the terms and highlight significant differences between them regarding the quality of work and practical implementation of the integration of children with SEN (Kavkler et al., 2008).

Integration is defined as the achievement of integrity in the sense of restoration or else “bringing together individual units, parts into a larger whole, combining ...” (SSKJ, 2016). Often it means simply placing a child with SEN within a mainstream institution, where the school and wider environment try to adjust/adapt the individual into an “average” student such that the child could be included in the regular education system and could thus achieve the prescribed standard of knowledge, reading, writing, numeracy skills, as well as be able to adapt to the method of receiving information, the social environment, obstacles to movement in the environment, etc. If the child is not able to attain the prescribed minimum educational achievements and adapt to the learning environment, they cannot achieve full integration into the school environment (Kavkler et al., 2008). Resman (2003) and Corbett (1999) also suggest that integrated individuals are only those who have adapted or conformed to the dominant standards in a particular (school) environment. It is expected of integrated students that they have the strength and willingness along with an ability to perform the same duties that are expected of every other student or child.

In contrast to integration, inclusion enables every individual to participate, as much as they can, since attaining the average achievement is not an essential condition for inclusion in the school and wider social environment. Here, the differences between individuals are primarily considered as a basis for social interactions (Kavkler et al., 2008). An inclusive culture supports a variety of needs and accommodates idiosyncrasies, which are influenced by gender, ethnicity, linguistic origin, different social status, educational level, along with certain deficiencies, problems, disorders and diseases (Corbett, 1999). While with integration, the education system remains unchanged despite the introduction of certain measures, inclusion encourages professional school practitioners to reflect on their performance and think about different approaches to teaching, various forms of assistance and ways of responding to the needs of all children (Farrell, 2005).

The education system is based on important general principles of democracy, autonomy and equal opportunities (Košir, 2008). The principles are based on human rights and the rule of law. For the education of students with SEN, in addition to the mentioned general principles, various other principles are also important, including: promoting integration, providing suitable conditions, ensuring equal opportunities, involving parents in the education process, arranging education of children and youth with SEN as close as possible to home, providing individualised approaches featuring differentiated and individualised programmes, ensuring continuity of programmes, and, referring individuals to an appropriate education programme in a timely manner, as well as encouraging interdisciplinarity, which dictates that various experts (from education, health care and social protection) are involved in educating children and youth with SEN (Kranjc, 2011).

Successful development of inclusion is influenced by several factors:

- professional support for teachers;
- additional expert and physical assistance for children and adolescents with special needs, prescribed in the *Regulations on additional expert and physical assistance to children with special needs* (2013);
- material resources (appropriate environment, learning, teaching and technical aids).

In addition to professional assistance provided to the teacher, technical and material resources influence the successful development of inclusion, since without additional material resources (appropriate environment, teaching, learning and technical aids) teachers cannot ensure the optimal opportunities for children with SEN to develop their skills. Since the inclusion of children with significant SEN is a very sensitive subject, with many proponents and even more opponents, it needs to be well planned and implemented utilising all available technical and material resources (Kavkler et al., 2008). Problems faced in the process of integrating children with SEN stem from, *inter alia*, the financial capacity of the country, poorly developed advocacy for inclusiveness in society, excessive stressing of the importance of educational performance, an extensive system of special institutions, teachers and other resources, poor conditions of education in mainstream schools, class size, organisational barriers, the different positions of teachers and professional workers, as well as their knowledge and strategy management (Kavkler et al., 2008).

At the same time it is important not to overlook the relationships between students themselves. Research shows (Pijl, Frostad, Flem, 2008) that students with SEN may have difficulty in establishing relationships with non-SEN peers. They are often less popular, have fewer friends and do not belong to a group of peers. Belonging to a group does not always happen of its own accord; therefore, we must be aware that children with SEN might need extra help in this regard. In order to maximise and optimise the development and success of every student, it is necessary to acknowledge the importance of differentiated and individualised teaching, encapsulated in the process of teaching and learning of students with different abilities (Dervarič, 2013). According to Pulec Lah teachers can differentiate and individualise the educational process by adjusting the four elements of the curriculum (content, procedures, tests and evaluation) and environment (Pulec Lah, 2008 in Dervarič, 2013).

### 3 RESEARCH METHODS

#### 3.1 Definition of the research subject and goals

In October 2007 the Council of Experts of the Republic of Slovenia for General Education adopted the Working Concept paper on Learning Difficulties in Primary School (Magajna et al., 2008), in which the Council laid out a technical foundation for the development of more effective approaches to the management of students with learning difficulties. It is based on a five-stage model of learning support, covering a continuum of learning difficulties ranging from mild to severe, from specific to general, from simple to complex and from short term to lifelong, as well as from those that require little learning assistance and

support to those who require a great deal of specific learning assistance and support. The model also calls for early management of students with learning difficulties (Magajna et al., 2008). In this study we followed the mentioned model and did not focus on specific types of learning difficulties, as geography teachers have to deal with students with different types of difficulties. Primary and secondary school teachers were thus faced with having to master strategies for best teaching practices along with general strategies for teaching children with SEN. Teaching assistance and support envisaged in the five-stage model include a range of measures, from assistance of teachers in the classroom, involvement of school counsellors or visiting specialist educators, to organisation of individual or group teaching assistance and support of external specialised institutions. Only through such measures can students with severe specific learning difficulties, or else those with certain deficiencies in individual aspects of learning, be directed towards an education programme featuring “adaptive implementation with additional professional assistance” (Magajna et al., 2008). Our research focused on various forms of assistance to the teacher in the classroom, the potential involvement of school counsellors or specialist educators, organisation of individual or group learning assistance and support of external specialised institutions, in so far as teachers participating in the survey expressed interest in these topics.

The survey of geography teachers’ views about their qualifications and experience teaching students with SEN in geography classes was conducted in the summer of 2015. The study sought to answer our primary research question, which was aimed at finding out what previous experience geography teachers had in inclusive schools and also how they rated their own ability (competence) to teach geography to students with SEN.

We wanted to provide answers to the following research questions:

- What previous experiences do geography teachers have working with children with SEN (both positive and negative experiences or problems they have faced)?
- Where do geography teachers get (or not get) support, assistance, advice and from whom (other geography teachers, professional support at the school, counsellors from the National Education Institute, pedagogical documents – i.e. curriculum, professional development training, in the literature, etc.)?
- What would geography teachers need to overcome barriers and achieve higher quality of their work and/or desired competency?
- To what extent do geography teachers feel they can cope with the requirements (skills, competences) for this type of work, what areas do they consider most lacking/problematic (working methods, learning and teaching materials, organisation of work, volume of work, teaching standards and norms, the number of students with SEN or else the variety of their specific needs, etc.)?

### **3.2 Methodology and research sample**

In August and September 2015 15 selected geography teachers were asked in writing to participate in our qualitative research. The criteria for selection of participants was based on: varied duration of employment as a geography teacher (thus the extent of experience), different levels and programmes of education (primary school, secondary school: three- and

four-year technical programmes, economic grammar school, general grammar school, hospital schools), equal gender representation, their previous documented pedagogical activity/engagement in the last five years (participation in expert consultations, professional excursions, professional training, academic publishing, mentoring of student teachers on practical placements, continued formal education, etc.) and dispersed spatial distribution of schools. However, their willingness to participate was of key importance. We received responses from eight female and five male geography teachers. Eleven participants had a university degree and held the title of teacher of geography, two other participants had master's degrees in geographic education. One of the participants mainly worked as an educator, to a lesser extent also as a geography teacher. Based on written interviews, the participating geography teachers had an average of 15.9 years of work experience (the lowest being seven years of experience and the highest being 34 years of work experience). Eight of them were employees at primary schools (five women and three men) and five at secondary schools (two men and three women). Interviewed geography teachers taught at schools in Koper, Ljubljana, Tržič, Jesenice, Slovenj Gradec, Celje, Krško, Maribor and Murska Sobota.

Our primary starting point for approaching the research topic centred on descriptive method with analysis of written documented sources. Data collection for the study was based on qualitative empirical pedagogical research. The basic research instrument we used was a written unstructured individual interview, which enabled us to gather more focused and in-depth explanations on the research topic. Interviewed teachers were presented with wide-ranging and open questions on the research topic, allowing them the opportunity to provide their personal opinions as a narrative and as such they were not limited in the scope of their responses. "Narrative inquiry and reflection allows the teachers to develop new meaning and interpretations, to organise their personal knowledge of teaching and learning, therefore altering their teaching practices, personal and professional development" (Konečnik Kotnik, Javornik Krečič, 2011, p. 10). The authors of the book "Kompetence v kadrovski praksi" (2005) found that when it comes to determining job competencies interviews can be a very appropriate method for obtaining data. A feature of in-depth interviews, such as those carried out by Legard et al. (2003), is their potential for being generative since they encourage the articulation of independent responses, which reflect the knowledge and understanding of the interviewee.

It is important to note that our qualitative pedagogical research is not intended to reveal representative situations within the studied topic (that is why we did not endeavour to match responses with statistical categories), rather we sought to examine whether participants, irrespective of their level of teaching (primary or secondary school), gender and work experience conform to key observed assumptions. This approach was based on our specific selection of an (exceptionally active) segment of geography teachers in terms of the amount they had cooperated, as well as variety of ways they had cooperated within their respective professions.

Data was analysed in descriptive terms and presented as generalised descriptions with selected individual responses as examples. When presenting the results in order to ensure the anonymity of the interviewees we did not use any names, rather we wrote only their gender, years of work experience and the type of school they worked in (except in two cases where we did not provide data on gender on account of the type of school - a small



number of hospital schools in Slovenia). Individual responses presented in the results section were copied word for word from the original interviews.

## 4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We sorted the opinions of interviewed geography teachers into designated thematic areas in which we, alongside the generalised description of the most common responses, highlighted also individual concrete answers as illustrations of noted generalisations. Along with the generalised descriptions we also provided their frequency in parentheses.

### 4.1 Previous positive and negative experiences

All of the respondents wrote down examples of positive experiences. In doing so they shared experiences both in terms of knowledge (cognitive experiences) and the development of geographical skills and abilities, as well as experiences relating to students' psychological and social development, thereby demonstrating their awareness of the importance of all three areas of teaching.

*“As an example of a really good experience I can describe how following a few individual discussions I succeeded in motivating a student who did not show even the slightest interest in lessons (also in geography) to work. It turned out that he was only interested in football. And I took advantage of that (the World Cup was also on at the time), such that for regional geography of the world he reached the minimum standard. Questions like where the teams are from (world map), how many players a particular country has compared to its population and what the training conditions (climate) are like, were no longer a problem for him.”* (male, 21 years of work experience, teaches at a primary school)

*“In all these years, there have been quite a few. One girl in particular stands out. Although she was physically impaired (walked with crutches), she attended all the excursions and participated in fieldwork. Before departing we agreed what she would do, she took a folding chair with her. She did walk slowly, but never fell behind, her classmates also took care of her in this regard. And, it wasn't an issue for her when they carried her onto the bus.”* (female, 25 years of work experience, teaches at a primary school)

Among the negative experiences of interviewed teachers, foremost were unrealistic expectations of both students and their parents which featured in half of the responses (six). They considered the engagement of parents in activities with students with SEN as an important prerequisite for their successful work. In second place in terms of frequency of responses (three) was the failure to comply with agreements on the part of students.

*“The parents of a student with attention deficit disorder and hyperactivity, that I had successfully motivated for learning geography through “his football”, confronted me on just that, arguing that the boy was, as it were, not*

*interested in anything other than football, and now he was learning about it in school as well. All my arguments why it was good didn't help at all and the mother said that I should stop.*" (male, 21 years of work experience, teaches at a primary school)

*"Among the most common disadvantages is a significant deficit in knowledge carried over from previous years. They do not keep up with regular study, relying instead on learning for scheduled exams and the fact that they would have someone (e.g. a teacher) with them to help them learn. They quickly forget learnt material. Since they have problems in a number of subjects they find it hard to follow lessons, also they are sometimes distracting, do not have an adequate background knowledge or else do not keep up with the minimum standards of knowledge."* (female, 34 years of work experience, teaches at a primary school)

*"My negative experiences were with students who weren't responsible and lacked work habits, those who exploited directives for privileges which they were actually entitled to based on the directives (extended time for spoken and written exams, larger letters on exams, pre-scheduled exams, etc.). They did not stick to any or most of the arrangements, for example they picked the dates for when to be assessed themselves and then were not at school on the scheduled day and their parents didn't do anything about it."* (female, 33 years of work experience, teaches at a technical secondary school)

## **4.2 Assistance, support, advice**

Generalised responses of interviewed teachers reveal they believe that, above all, teachers need to rely on themselves and on their own skill, experience and ingenuity (seven responses). The next most common response cited was assistance from school counselling services (five responses). In these responses they listed educators, specialist educators, psychologists and social workers. They also noted that they were aware of the fact that their counsellor colleagues are limited both in time and knowledge, and that their assistance does not relate to geographical advice. Three interviewees noted that they consulted professional literature in order to make specific adjustments in their geography lessons. They did not mention cooperation with counsellors from the National Education Institute, however one interviewee mentioned a seminar focusing on minimum standards of knowledge in geography lessons as a welcome support in her work with children with SEN.

*"The impression remains that we teachers are often left to rely on our own abilities, experience and ingenuity."* (male, 15 years of work experience, teaches at a general grammar school)

*"It is good to cooperate with educators at the school and comply with the minimum standards of knowledge in the curriculum. In terms of minimum standards, I got a lot out of the training organised by the National*

*Education Institute in Ljubljana.*” (female, 34 years of work experience, teaches at a primary school)

*“In unforeseen situations when teaching children with special needs we can always rely on the assistance and advice of the medical staff and professional team.”* (33 years of work experience, teaches at a hospital school)

*“In cases when I need pedagogical advice for working with students with special needs, I always turn to our specialist educator. On occasions I have gone to the attending psychologist at the Paediatric Clinic for help with an individual student. In terms of teaching geographic content to a student with special needs, so far I have not had such troubles that I would require the assistance of geography experts from the National Education Institute or from the faculty.”* (male, 15 years of work experience, teaches at a general grammar school)

*“Personally, I have already sought out and read literature on this subject. At the hospital school we don’t turn to the National Education Institute for help.”* (7 years of work experience, teaches at a hospital school)

### 4.3 Teachers’ needs

According to the respondents realistic expectations of the students as well as the support and cooperation of parents are the most important factors for successful work (five responses), though they note that this is often not the case. Therefore, non-cooperation of parents is often mentioned among negative experiences (written by a secondary school teacher, 15 years of work experience).

*“Although Tone was a nice boy with a desire to successfully pass the class, his perception of what it takes to achieve that was completely unrealistic, “in the clouds”. In our structured schools, which “rush onwards and upwards,” as a teacher it’s so hard to expect such a child to have the work habits and mental activity required to learn and keep up. Would it really be so unacceptable to repeat a year? For most parents it is unthinkable, even though their child really cannot keep up.”* (female, 33 years of work experience, teaches at a primary school)

*“I think parents should be more engaged and help children also through home tutoring.”* (female, 33 years of work experience, teaches at a technical secondary school)

Drawing on a number of responses (four responses), too few opportunities for individualised approaches, due in part to the excessive number of students with SEN, as well as insufficient hours for individual work with them (35 hours of individual professional assistance per year), the rigidity of the system (regulations, laws) and the question whether such a large number of children designated as having SEN is justified, present an obstacle to more effective work. The responses also reveal the interviewees’ concerns about other students in the class being neglected (three responses).

*“I think objective working conditions are also an important factor. A teacher who is able to devote more attention to a child with special needs because they work with a small group of children or in certain cases even one on one, probably establishes a more genuine relationship with the student; gets to know them better, teaches them more effectively, better evaluates them and more easily motivates them compared to a teacher in a classroom of 28 children, where three have special needs.” (7 years of work experience, teaches at a hospital school)*

*“The scope of work and the standards and norms of working with students with special needs should be adapted to the number of students as well as their specific characteristics. There should be concrete and more sophisticated legislation in this area, while more extensive and additional professional support for teachers should also be provided. The number of students with special needs is rising, and I have a feeling that many people are also exploiting this.” (male, 15 years of work experience, teaches at a general grammar school)*

*“I am aware that students with special needs need more attention, time and a lot of adapted material. But sometimes I ask myself: what about the rest of the students in the classroom? You have to be honest and admit that if you're in a class with more than two students with different special needs then you simply cannot work to the same quality with the other twenty or more students as well.” (female, 25 years of work experience, teaches at a primary school)*

*“What bothers me most is that psychologists, specialist educators, defectologists and speech therapists too often insist that it is necessary to make adjustments for each student, e.g. time, tempo, font size, etc., even if from previous experience we know that this is not necessary and that with minor adjustments we could achieve almost the same results. These types of adjustments lead to students being excluded from the group.” (33 years of work experience, teaches at a hospital school)*

*“As the number of students with special needs in a class increases, it would be worth considering the relevant standards and norms. And, of course, in this regard, also consider whether all children designated as having special needs really have them.” (female, 33 years of work experience, teaches at a technical secondary school)*

A third set of proposals relates to professional development for teachers (two responses) and their need to have appropriate interlocutors when they seek feedback on their work. In this section respondents highlighted the problems encountered when seeking to attend additional training. There was also one response that mentioned the already heavy workload of teachers.

*“Teachers would need even more experience or else that they could have discussions with someone that really knows the field, as well as additional hours for individualised work (with several students who have problems at the same time).” (female, 34 years of work experience, teaches at a primary school)*

*“Unfortunately, we teachers do not talk much amongst ourselves about the problems of students with special needs. Neither with colleagues in the staffroom, and even less with fellow geographers. It’s not that we are not interested, but there are so many different problems and tasks that need to be completed that most people don’t have time for it. Though it is needed. Unfortunately, there are no longer any geography teacher working groups. In the past we “elementary [teachers]” used to meet and compare experiences, and help each other with materials, etc.” (male, 21 years of work experience, teaches at primary school)*

*“Our school has financial problems. Even for professional development training I need to pay the fee out of my own pocket. Many teachers prefer to completely avoid additional training.” (7 years work of experience, teaches at a hospital school)*

#### **4.4 Competency for teaching students with special educational needs**

In their responses interviewed geography teachers critically rated their own competencies and openly shared their views. In doing so they highlighted the fact that, apart from their own judgement (“*by feeling*”, as described by one interviewee with 25 years of work experience, teaching at a primary school), they do not have the mechanisms (criteria) that would help them in self-evaluation (five responses). Furthermore, some interviewees are aware of that and assessed it as a deficiency (three responses). They consider working with students with behavioural problems most demanding, because in their view such students have the largest influence on classroom dynamics. Three of the interviewed geography teachers felt that the teaching materials they had thus far created, facilitate working with newer generations of students. Only one interviewee out of thirteen wrote that they felt adequately competent.

*“Up until now I have been able to cope with this type of work, even though we never had any kind of training. I customise working methods by feel, depending on the needs. I follow the rules outlined in decisions - determining SEN status.” (female, 33 years of work experience, teaches at a technical secondary school)*

*“In some areas I feel competent, while in others I do not. After several years of collecting and producing teaching materials it is now a fair bit easier. Especially with students who have impaired vision and hearing. With the physically handicapped there are also not many problems. Most of the difficulties arise with students who refuse to participate, are unmotivated, undisciplined. This is not just a problem for the individual student, but it becomes a problem for the whole class, i.e. all 25 students. I still don’t know what should be done in these situations.” (female, 25 years of work experience, teaches at a primary school)*

*“I don’t know if I am competent for such tasks. There are lessons when I have a good feeling and am pleased with my work, where the students and I appreciate their progress. Unfortunately, these are the exceptions, in most*

*cases each lesson is a “fight” to make sure students with special needs at least understand and follow the organisational instructions for the lesson: place notebooks on the table, write, paste the worksheet into the notebook, look at the map on the board and then also at the map on the desk - it’s clear to us that the maps are different (!!!), look at a picture in a textbook, a video presentation, write down what there is for homework. Oh, and that they don’t disturb the others too much.” (female, 33 years of work experience, teaches at a primary school)*

*“Personally, I feel competent working with students with special needs and so I don’t have a feeling that I would necessarily need additional training in this area.” (7 years of work experience, teaches at a hospital school).*

#### **4.5 Satisfaction and needs of geography teachers**

The questions about what the geography teachers need to overcome obstacles and achieve higher quality of their work or to achieve the required competency and what they experience during the monitoring of the results of their work had the lowest response rate.

In this section two responses ascribed satisfaction of working with students with SEN to students’ progression or their success, as well as feelings that as a teacher they had done all that was necessary.

*“I’m doing my best under the given circumstances and I really think that I put in an effort. And my colleagues do the same.” (male, 14 years of work experience, teaches at a secondary technical and vocational school)*

*“I’ve already had two students who were almost completely deaf. They sat in the front, I explained things somewhat slower, so that they always saw my mouth. Both finished school very successfully and they were not a burden for me, all that was needed was a little bit of accommodating. I was glad of their success and satisfied, because I also contributed something to it.” (female, 33 years of work experience, teaches at a technical secondary school)*

When it comes to deficiencies there was repetition of responses from other sets of questions, where respondents stressed the excessive number of students with SEN included in a single class (i.e. there is a need for smaller study groups) and inadequate supply of specific learning and teaching aids that would facilitate individualised work, as well as additional professional development training and sharing of experiences and views amongst geography teachers. One response also mentioned that teachers have a feeling of being powerless when seeking solutions and implementing changes.

*“The problem lies in the fact that in certain classes there are too many students classed as having special educational needs. In 2014/15 in one of the classes there were as many as 8 out of 29 students. In this situation after all the discussions I ran out of time for other students. If there are not many special needs students (up to three), then generally there are no problems.*

*However, the number of these students is increasing every year.” (female, 33 years of work experience, teaches at a technical secondary school)*

*“A deficiency that I consider critical is the poor equipment of the hospital school with teaching and learning materials/equipment. It often happens that during the class I cannot get access to the internet for teaching purposes. It would be great if the school would buy some new teaching and learning materials to replace the old, worn and outdated (atlases, flashcards, a new laptop, etc.), however at the moment the school finances are in such a state that I won't be proposing this to the headmaster anytime soon.” (7 years of work experience, teaches at a hospital school)*

## 5 CONCLUSION

Using the descriptive method we analysed various expert publications (Kavkler et al., 2005; Magajna et al., 2008) to study the introduction of the so-called inclusive school from the perspective of the fundamental principles which state that, *inter alia*, the SEN of students with learning difficulties require adapted learning environments. Data collection for the survey dealing with geography teachers' opinions is based on the qualitative empirical pedagogical research. As a basic research instrument we used individual written unstructured interview which provided us with a more focused and in-depth explanation of the researched phenomenon. This was based on the assumption that teachers have the most important role in providing accommodating and motivational learning environments. The teacher must implement strategies for best teaching practices at all stages of the five-step model of learning support for students. In this regard, national experts often refer to international experience in monitoring the work of teachers. Elliot, Doxey and Stephenson (2004) suggest that we can only speak about inclusion when it incorporates reflective practice, understanding of the school environment, knowledge of the SEN of students and the organisation of a school tailored to students and teachers, such that it takes into account the needs of all schools members and at the same time demands they fulfil their responsibilities. Mitchell (2008) argues that there cannot be inclusion without adaptation of the curriculum, teaching methods and techniques of testing and assessment, as well as support and assistance for teachers in the classroom. He considers inclusion as a multi-faceted educational strategy, which needs constant careful monitoring. Furthermore, going back as far as 1998 Florian (Davis, Florian, 2004) proposed a set of essential (though not the only) conditions that must be met if we want inclusive education to become an important model for effective special needs education. Listed among them were the possibility for a student to participate in decision-making processes, a positive attitude towards learning capacities of all children, teachers' knowledge of learning difficulties and appropriate use of specific teaching methods, along with the support of parents and teachers.

The basic research question underpinning our qualitative pedagogical research, conducted on the basis of written interviews, was how geography teachers in Slovenian primary and secondary schools assess their own capabilities (competency) to teach geography to

students with SEN. Generalised answers from thirteen interviewed Slovenian primary and secondary school geography teachers show that they are aware of the importance and complexity of their role, while they fully accept the responsibility for performing it. They critically assessed their own competencies. In their work they most frequently rely on previous experience, they seek out expert literature and consult with counselling services at the school (educators, specialist educators, psychologists, etc.). Respondents had not in the past attended professional development training in this field, because they did not come across it, although, based on their professional references, in the past five years they were very actively involved in various facets of school level geography. They find that they do not have enough opportunities to compare best practices among geography teachers and they regret the lack of interlocutors with whom to discuss and reflect on their work.

They have both positive and negative experiences teaching students with SEN. According to respondents, support from parents is most appreciated, while lack of support is perceived as a significant impediment to progress. Among the major shortcomings of current practices in inclusive schools they list individual classes containing excessive numbers of students with SEN. Furthermore, they stress that the inclusion of more than two students with different SEN can have a significant impact not only on the difficulty of the work with such students itself but also on their ability to effectively manage the entire class. Unfortunately, be it in the geographical pedagogical materials or else in national professional resources, they cannot find sufficient suitable guidance for teaching students with SEN, moreover not all of them have adequate support from counselling services in their schools. Consequently, respondents expressed the need not only for additional professional training but, above all, for the adaptation of standards and norms for teaching. Their views do not support the position of Kavkler (2009), who argues that teachers and other school professionals who hold positive attitudes towards the inclusion of children with SEN can find enough strategies and forms of assistance in current settings to ensure optimal inclusion of these children.

Studies into implementation indicate that the innovativeness or effectiveness of practice is contingent on time being devoted to understanding new approaches, philosophical acceptance and perception of the importance of introducing innovations, as well as teachers' confidence in their technical competency and ability to impact on student learning (Davis, Florian, 2004). According to Davis and Florian research in this area should include systematic, long-term development work, which allows for verification of the impact of innovations on performance. Such research is essential if we want to understand how a combination of approaches to learning, or else so-called multimodal approaches are used in different contexts and for different purposes. Taking into account the complexity and challenges of working with students with SEN in inclusive schools along with the responses of the interviewed geography teachers, the issue of ensuring appropriate and stimulating working environments for teachers arises, as does the question to what degree geography teachers have in the past been able to use the prescribed expert guidelines for effective work with SEN students.

Based on the experience of the interviewed geography teachers and due to the fact that in the professional literature there is no research in the field of teaching geography SEN



students in Slovenia, we can say that so far there has been no systematic evaluation of the impact of inclusion on students' achievement in geography lessons, neither from the perspective of SEN students or their classmates nor from the perspective of the teacher's work (e.g. their professional competence and workload). Since it is not clear what amendments and improvements are actually needed it is rather difficult to propose any of them. Geography teaching in foreign inclusive schools (Scruggs, Mastropjeri, 2007; Jitendra, Edwards, Sacks, 2004) is often based on adapted or special curricula for SEN students and teaching is carried out simultaneously by two teachers allowing them to focus on individual needs of students.

*(Translated into English by James Cosier)*

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