# Teachers' Attitudes, Concerns, and Competences Regarding the Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Primary Schools in Slovenia

Simona Prosen[1], Helena Smrtnik Vitulić[1]

[1] University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

**ABSTRACT:**

The article presents the attitudes, concerns, and perceived competencies of Slovenian teachers regarding the inclusion of students with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream primary schools. The 126 participating teachers self-assessed these topics using a questionnaire specifically designed for the study. The findings indicate that teachers are generally supportive of inclusive practices. However, their attitudes vary considerably depending on the type of SEN: teachers are generally in favour of the inclusion of students with long-term illness, physical disabilities, autistic spectrum disorders, emotional and behavioral difficulties, and specific learning difficulties, but have significant reservations about the inclusion of students with blindness and visual impairment, deafness and hearing loss, speech and language disabilities, and intellectual disabilities. These attitudes are consistent regardless of the teacher's length of professional experience. Teachers described several concerns regarding inclusion and reported different levels of competency for teaching students with different types of SEN. Finally, the results of the study show a clear connection between teachers' perceived higher competence and their more positive attitudes towards inclusion. The study highlights critical gaps in inclusion implementation in Slovenia and provides further suggestions for teacher training and professional development, particularly in relation to students with SEN.

*Keywords:* Special Educational Needs, Inclusion, Teacher, Attitude, Mainstream Schools

**INTRODUCTION**

An important factor for the sustainable and long-term development of education is inclusive education, which aims to ensure that all students have the opportunity to participate, engage, and effectively acquire the knowledge, skills, and positive attitudes necessary for successful integration into society (Kavkler, 2024). Although the introduction of inclusive education is strongly promoted in European Union countries, its practical implementation remains limited in many places. The methods by which individual countries attempt to implement inclusion vary, and each country faces its own challenges.

Due to the difficulties in implementing inclusion in practice, two discourses exist about inclusion: the discourse of inclusion for some and the discourse of inclusion for all (Leijen et al., 2021). The discourse of inclusion for some represents the idea that a larger proportion of students with SEN have the right to a high-quality education in mainstream schools, while students with very severe SEN are educated in special institutions, where they are offered intensive special educational treatment. Inclusion for all, on the other hand, represents the idea that all students, including those with SEN, have the right to education together with their peers in mainstream schools (Dignath et al., 2022).

**Students with SEN and inclusive education in Slovenia**
According to Mitchell (2015), Slovenia is one of the countries that has signed all of the key international documents and foresees inclusion in national documents, but does not implement them fully in practice. Although great progress has been made in inclusive education, Slovenia still represents a case of inclusion for some. More needs to be done to improve support for students with SEN and to better adapt teaching to the needs of each student. As the success of inclusive education largely depends on the interpretation and implementation of inclusion in schools (Kavkler, 2024), which is mainly performed by teachers, the present study aims to better understand Slovenian teachers' attitudes, competences, and concerns regarding the inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream schools.

Nine groups of SEN students are defined in Slovenia: intellectual disabilities, blindness and visual impairment, deafness and hearing loss, speech and language disabilities, physical disabilities, long-term illness, specific learning difficulties, autistic spectrum disorders, and emotional and behavioural difficulties (ZUOPP-1,

2011, Act. 2). The National Institute of Education of the Republic of Slovenia (Vovk Ornik, 2015) defines these groups as follows. The category of intellectual disabilities indicates significant limitations in cognitive functioning and adaptive behaviour that affect learning and daily living skills. Blindness and visual impairment refer to partial or total loss of sight, while deafness and hearing loss refer to the partial or complete loss of hearing. Speech and language disabilities include problems with articulation, fluency, voice, speech comprehension, and speech production. Physical disabilities include partial or total motor impairments (e.g., paraplegia), while long-term illness refers to health conditions that persist over a long period of time. Specific learning difficulties are characterized by difficulties in specific areas of learning, such as dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. Autistic spectrum disorders include deficits in social communication and interaction, as well as restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities. Emotional and behavioural difficulties include persistent disruptive behaviours and problems with emotion regulation.

Students from each of these groups can be included in mainstream schools following a curriculum that requires the acquisition of at least minimum knowledge standards. Students with speech and language disabilities, physical disabilities, or autistic spectrum disorders, as well as blind and visually impaired students or deaf and hard of hearing students, also have the possibility of attending special primary schools that are tailored to their particular SEN (Osnovnošolsko izobraževanje otrok s posebnimi potrebami, n. d.). In these schools, education is organised in smaller classes, with extended school hours and access to a multidisciplinary team of specialists for additional support, which allows for more individualised work with students (Lesar & Smrtnik Vitulić, 2014). The basic criterion for the student's inclusion in or exclusion from mainstream schools is academic rather than social (Peček & Lesar, 2006).

For students with mild intellectual disabilities, another educational option exists in Slovenia: an adapted primary school programme with a lower educational standard. Jurišič (2003) found that 90% of these students started their education in mainstream primary school, but were redirected to the adapted programme after not achieving the required educational standards.

Across Europe, the proportion of students with SEN in mainstream schools is increasing (Schwab, 2020). This is true for Slovenia as well: the number of students with SEN in mainstream primary schools increased from

10,091 in 2015/2016 (5.91% of the total primary school population) to 15,712 (8.11% of the total primary school population) in 2023/24 (MIZŠ, 2024). The most represented group with SEN in mainstream schools is specific learning difficulties (39.6%).

In the Slovenian assessment of knowledge (Vehovc et al., 2010), students with SEN included in mainstream schools performed consistently worse (on average 10–20%) in all subjects than their peers without SEN, even after allowing for possible adjustments. Similar findings have been reported in other countries (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). The success of students with SEN depends not only on their abilities and efforts, but is also significantly influenced by other factors, such as the adaptation of the teaching process (Licardo & Zavasnik, 2023). The latter is, inter alia, influenced by teachers' attitudes towards students with SEN.

## Teachers' attitudes, concerns, and competences regarding the inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream schools

An attitude is a relatively enduring and general evaluation of an object, person, group, issue, or concept on a dimension ranging from negative to positive (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2018). It influences feelings and behaviours related to a particular object (Bariffe & Pittas, 2021). The European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education and the United Nations Educational Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (in Saloviita, 2020) state that teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of students with SEN are one of the most important factors for the success of an inclusive education programme. This understanding is important for the design of teacher education programmes aimed at improving teachers' ability to implement inclusive education.

Avramidis and Norwich (2002) found that teachers generally have a positive attitude towards inclusive practices and emphasise the importance of collaboration and support systems in fostering this attitude. A meta-analysis conducted by Dignath et al. (2022) evaluated a total of 102 studies published between 2000 and 2020, and analysed the data of 40,898 teachers from 40 countries. The results showed that teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of students with SEN, as well as their self-efficacy regarding inclusion, were assessed as average, suggesting there is still room for improvement.

The type of SEN has a significant impact on teachers' attitudes towards educating students with disabilities/difficulties. Studies such as the meta-analyses by Avramidis and Norwich (2002) have found that teachers are more willing to teach students with physical or medical disabilities than those with intellectual, behavioural, or sensory disabilities, such as visual or hearing disabilities. Teachers often have more negative attitudes towards disabilities that they believe require greater adjustments to their teaching methods. They also report that working with students with emotional and behavioural difficulties is significantly more stressful for them than working with students with other types of SEN, which can negatively affect their interaction with students (Avramidis et al., 2000; Scanlon & Barnes-Holmes, 2013).

Lemoine et al. (2024) undertook a more nuanced study of teachers' attitudes, examining affective, cognitive, and behavioural components regarding the education of certain groups of students with SEN in both prospective and practising teachers. The results show that cognitive attitudes were significantly more positive for students with sensory disabilities than with intellectual disabilities, affective attitudes were more positive for students with autistic spectrum disorders than with intellectual disabilities, while behavioural attitudes did not differ significantly by type of SEN. Teachers may have more negative cognitive and affective attitudes towards the education of students with intellectual disabilities, as they require greater adaptation in teaching practices due to problems associated with significant limitations in cognitive functioning and adaptive behaviour, which interfere with learning (Lemoine et al., 2024).

In some studies, teachers' age was unrelated to their attitudes towards inclusion (Mónico et al., 2020), whereas other studies (Charitaki et al., 2022) found that younger teachers were slightly more favourable towards inclusion than their older colleagues. Charitaki et al. (2022) suggest that more experienced teachers are less inclined to adapt their teaching methods than less experienced teachers. Lemoine et al. (2024) confirm this change in teachers' attitudes towards inclusion after 5 to 14 years of service, possibly because teachers who had been in service longer had received less training on inclusion than teachers who had only recently completed their education. Inadequate preparation for work with students with SEN (Rihter et al., 2021) may lead to teachers' concerns about inclusive education. Studies on this topic (Jury et al., 2023; Protić Gava et al., 2018; Sharma et al., 2009) stress that teachers are particularly concerned about insufficient human and material resources for inclusive education, such as large class sizes, which can hinder them in their efforts to devote sufficient attention to students with SEN. Teachers also note the lack of clear directions within schools on how to work with SEN students.

Teacher competence, which includes knowledge about working with students with SEN, is also crucial to the quality of work with such students. Lesar and Žveglič Mihelič (2018) identify teacher education as one of the key factors for implementing inclusion in the school system. The same authors found that only 27% of university teachers include topics on inclusion in their lectures and concluded that (future) teachers are consequently not adequately prepared for inclusive education. This is, as well as for teachers in other countries (e.g., Schwab et al., 2015). However, teachers continue to develop their competence in working with students with SEN while they are in service at schools. Once they have direct experience with students with SEN, their confidence in their abilities tends to increase. Several authors (Avramidis et al., 2000; Chanturia, 2023; de Boer et al., 2010; Dignath et al., 2022; Tussupbekova et al., 2024) stress the importance of training, which can significantly improve teachers' competencies in terms of effective implementation of inclusive practices. However, teachers also need permanent resources that support their teaching, thus increasing their self-confidence and professional well-being. This support could take the form of professional help (e.g., from a psychologist or a teaching counsellor) or assistance from their colleagues in developing inclusive teaching practices (Lemoine et al., 2024).

**Purpose of the present study**
While international research has consistently highlighted the crucial role of teachers' attitudes, concerns, and perceived competencies in successful inclusion (e.g., Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Dignath et al., 2022; Protić-Gava et al., 2018), comprehensive data specific to the Slovenian context remain limited. Building on the established context of inclusive education in Slovenia, this study addresses this significant gap.

The primary aim of this research is to systematically analyse and describe the status of inclusive education in Slovenian mainstream primary schools from the perspective of teachers. This is achieved by examining their attitudes towards the inclusion of students with nine specific types of SEN, and the potential importance of their years of professional experience for these attitudes. Furthermore, the study provides a detailed description of the concerns teachers face in their daily practice and assesses their self-reported competence in working with students across various SEN types. A key focus is to determine the relationship between their perceived competence and their attitudes towards inclusion. By

examining these factors, this research offers an overview of the challenges and opportunities for inclusive education in Slovenia.

The research questions (RQ) are:

RQ1. What are teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream schools, and do these attitudes differ across different types of SEN? Are these attitudes related to teachers' length of service?

RQ2. What concerns do teachers have regarding the inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream schools?

RQ3. How do teachers self-assess their own competence in working with different groups of students with SEN in mainstream schools, and is their self-assessed level (higher or lower) of competence related to their attitudes towards inclusion?

## METHODOLOGY

**Sample**
A total of 126 mainstream primary school teachers (124 women and two men) with an average age of 42.87 years ($SD$ = 10.48 years) participated in the study. In Slovenia, primary education in mainstream schools lasts nine years, from the age of six to fifteen. Participants were recruited from six primary schools selected through a convenience sampling approach. On average, they had 18.79 years of teaching experience ($M$ = 11.74 years, $SD$ = 11.74 years). School principals facilitated the distribution of the survey link to their teaching staff. The estimated response rate was 68%, based on the estimated number of eligible teachers at the contacted schools.

**Instrument**
A questionnaire on teachers' attitudes, concerns, and competences regarding the inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream schools was developed for the purposes of this study. The first part of the questionnaire asked about teachers' age, gender, education, and years of teaching experience. Teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of students with SEN were assessed in the second part of the questionnaire using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1-disagree, 2-partly disagree, 3-cannot decide, 4-partly agree, 5-fully agree). The items included attitudes towards the inclusion of students across nine specific types of SEN, as defined by Slovenian legislation (ZUOPP-1, 2011, Act. 2): blind and visually impaired students, deaf and hard of hearing students, students with intellectual disabilities, students with speech and language disabilities, students

with physical disabilities, students with long-term illness, students with emotional and behavioural difficulties, students with specific learning difficulties, and students with autistic spectrum disorders. Then, in the third part of the questionnaire, there was an open-ended question about teachers' concerns when working with students with SEN. Finally, teachers were asked to self-assess their professional competence in working with each group of SEN students. For each SEN group, participants rated their perceived competence using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 - disagree, 2 - partly disagree, 3 - cannot decide, 4 - partly agree, 5 - fully agree).

### Procedure

The study was reviewed and approved by the local university ethics review board (No. 13/2022) prior to data collection. Before conducting the study, we contacted the principals of ten mainstream primary schools from different regions in Slovenia, with whom we had previously collaborated, and asked them to participate in the study. We explained the purpose of the study and informed them that the collected data would be anonymous and treated with confidentiality. Six principals provided their verbal consent to participate in the study. Then, teachers from the selected schools were asked for their consent to participate in the study. They were informed that their participation was entirely voluntary. Those who agreed to participate received the

questionnaire in person at their school and were given one week to complete it. The anonymous questionnaires were collected in a box and then gathered by the authors of this article.

### RESULTS

### Teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of students with SEN

This section addresses the first RQ, which concerns teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream schools and the possible differences in these attitudes with regard to the different types of SEN. Possible connections between teachers' attitudes and their length of service are also investigated. Teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of students with SEN are presented below. (Figure 1).

The results show that the surveyed teachers at least partially agree ($M \geq 4.00$, meaning partial or full agreement) with the inclusion of students with long-term illness ($M = 4.33 \pm SD = 0.95$), physical disabilities ($M = 4.18 \pm SD = 1.12$), autistic spectrum disorders ($M = 4.14 \pm SD = 1.04$), emotional and behavioural difficulties ($M = 4.00 \pm SD = 1.06$), and specific learning difficulties ($M = 4.00 \pm SD = 1.13$) in mainstream schools. The teachers are indecisive regarding the inclusion ($2.50 < M_s < 3.50$, meaning partial disagreement or indecisiveness) of students with blindness and visual impairment
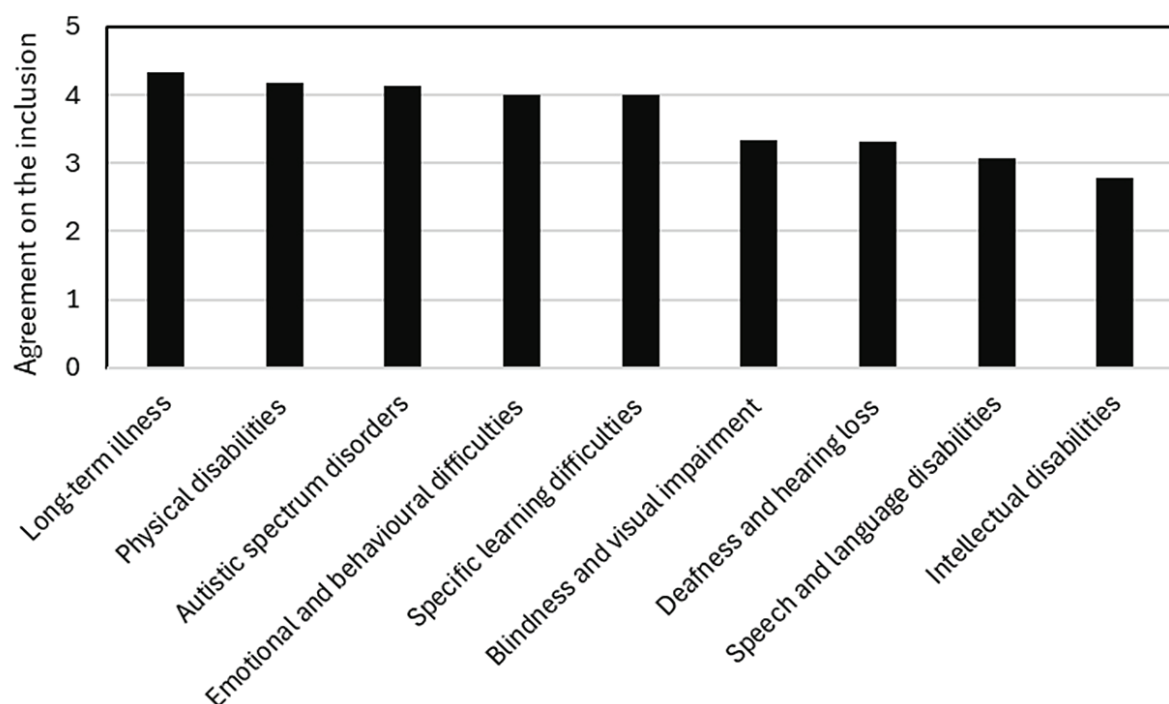


Figure 1 Teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of students with different types of SEN in mainstream schools.

($M$ = 3.33 ± $SD$ = 1.26), deafness and hearing loss ($M$ = 3.32 ± $SD$ = 1.26), speech and language disabilities ($M$ = 3.08 ± $SD$ = 1.42), and intellectual disabilities ($M$ = 2.79 ± $SD$ = 0.29).

Repeated measures ANOVA tests were conducted to determine possible differences in the teachers' attitudes towards all nine types of SEN. Such differences were confirmed ($F$(8, 118) = 42.668, $p$ < 0.00) with a large effect size ($\eta^2$ = 0.25) according to Cohen (1988). Additional pairwise comparisons between all nine types of SEN (paired sample *t*-tests) show that the teachers have significantly more positive attitudes towards students with *long-term illness* compared to all other categories of students with SEN, such as students with physical disabilities ($t$(125) = 2.09, $p$ = 0.04), autistic spectrum disorders ($t$(125) = 2.01, $p$ = 0.04), emotional and behavioural difficulties ($t$(125) = 3.99, $p$ = 0.00), specific learning difficulties ($t$(125) = 3.19, $p$ = 0.00), blindness and visual impairment ($t$(125) = 8.96, $p$ = 0.00), deafness and hearing loss ($t$(125) = 8.93, $p$ = 0.00), speech and language disabilities ($t$(125) = 9.58, $p$ = 0.00), and intellectual disabilities ($t$(125) = 12.66, $p$ = 0.00).

Other comparisons involving students with *physical disabilities* show that the teachers have significantly more positive attitudes regarding their inclusion in mainstream schools compared to students with blindness and visual impairment ($t$(125) = 7.32, $p$ = 0.00), deafness and hearing loss ($t$(125) = 7.51, $p$ = 0.00), speech and language disabilities ($t$(125) = 8.73, $p$ = 0.00), and intellectual disabilities ($t$(125) = 11.08, $p$ = 0.00).

When evaluating students with *autistic spectrum disorders*, the results show significantly more positive teacher attitudes regarding their inclusion in mainstream schools compared to the inclusion of students with blindness and visual impairment ($t$(125) = 5.83, $p$ = 0.00), deafness and hearing loss ($t$(125) = 6.08, $p$ = 0.00), speech and language disabilities ($t$(125) = 0.38, $p$ = 0.00), and intellectual disabilities ($t$(125) = 1.56, $p$ = 0.00).

When focusing on students with *emotional and behavioural difficulties*, the teachers' attitudes regarding their inclusion are more positive than for students with blindness and visual impairment ($t$(125) = 4.93, $p$ = 0.00), deafness and hearing loss ($t$(125) = 5.09, $p$ = 0.00), speech and language disabilities ($t$(125) = 6.17, $p$ = 0.00), and intellectual disabilities ($t$(125) = 9.36, $p$ = 0.00).

The teachers' attitudes regarding the inclusion of students with *specific learning difficulties* are also significantly more positive than those regarding students with blindness and visual impairment ($t$(125) = 0.42, $p$ = 0.00), deafness and hearing loss (t(125) = 5.56, p = 0.00),

speech and language disabilities ($t$(125) = 8.63, $p$ = 0.00), and intellectual disabilities ($t$(125) = 0.91, $p$ = 0.00).

The teachers' attitudes regarding the inclusion of *blind and visually impaired* students are more positive than those regarding students with intellectual disabilities ($t$(125) = 4.94, $p$ = 0.00). Finally, the inclusion of students with *deafness and hearing loss* is perceived more positively by teachers than the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities ($t$(125) = 4.85, $p$ = 0.00).

Further analysis reveals no significant correlation between the teachers' attitudes towards inclusion and the length (years) of their teaching experience (all Pearson *r*-values $p$ > 0.05).

## Teachers' concerns regarding the inclusion of students with SEN

In the continuation, we address the second RQ, which focuses on teachers' concerns regarding the inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream schools. Qualitative data, including descriptions of teachers' concerns, are analysed using content analysis according to the method of Greneheim and Lundman (2004). The surveyed teachers' descriptions were read by the authors of the present article several times independently in order to fully understand the content. The authors then independently defined the specifics of the teachers' concerns and compared their results before the final version was agreed upon. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 presents the specifics of concerns reported by teachers regarding the inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream schools, categorized by their source. *Educational practice* is the most common cause of concerns ($f$ = 107): the large number of students in the classroom ($f$ = 39), followed by the lack of time/excessive curriculum content ($f$ = 32), problems with teaching materials ($f$ = 22), and limited spatial conditions ($f$ = 20).

The characteristics of *students* with SEN are the teachers' second most common source of concern regarding their inclusion in mainstream schools ($f$ = 62). Specifically, students' disruptive behaviour ($f$ = 24), specific (learning) challenges ($f$ = 20), and difficulties in acquiring knowledge ($f$ = 18) are mentioned as the main obstacles for teachers when working with them.

Another important concern regarding the inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream schools is *parents* ($f$ = 57): parents of students with SEN may have unrealistic expectations of their children ($f$ = 23) and may fail to cooperate sufficiently with teachers ($f$ = 18), while parents of other students in the class may lack an understanding of students with SEN ($f$ = 16). *Other*

Table 1. **Specifics of teachers' concerns regarding the inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream schools.**

| Source of concern | Type of concern | Example | f |
|---|---|---|---|
| Educational practice (f = 107) | number of students (e.g., too many students in the class, a high number of students with difficulties) | The room is not adapted, and the classroom is often too small. | 339 |
| | lack of time/excessive curriculum content (e.g., overloaded curriculum, insufficient time to prepare material, excessive time spent on individual assessment) | I don't have enough time to prepare the material the student needs. | 36 |
| | problems with teaching materials (e.g., lack of teaching aids and resources, insufficient materials for illustration, insufficiently adapted teaching materials for specific difficulties) | There is a lack of materials and resources to illustrate the learning content. | 22 |
| | limited spatial conditions (e.g., inadequate room configuration, classrooms too small) | There are too many children in the class. | 220 |
| Students with SEN (f = 62) | disruptive behaviour (e.g., aggressive behaviour, frequent disruption of lessons, need for constant attention) | A child with ADHD has major problems because he lacks motivation and concentration. | 24 |
| | specific challenges (e.g., speech and language problems, poor concentration, and interest) | The child is unfocused; his concentration is low. | 20 |
| | lack of understanding/knowledge (e.g., difficulty understanding new material, lack of understanding at higher levels of knowledge, slow progress, slow processing of information) | The child has difficulty understanding new learning material. | 18 |
| Parents (f = 57) | unrealistic expectations (e.g., parents' high expectations of their child's performance despite SEN) | Parents find it difficult to accept that their child is special. | 23 |
| | lack of cooperation with parents (e.g., insufficient communication and cooperation with the parents of a child with SEN) | The parents are not willing to cooperate. | 18 |
| | preparation of other parents (e.g., parents need to be informed about the inclusion of students with SEN, the lack of willingness of other parents to accept a student with SEN) | The parents of other students must be prepared for such a child. | 16 |
| Other students (f = 40) | social exclusion/inadequate understanding of students with SEN (e.g., lack of understanding of the importance of adjustments, non-acceptance of students with SEN) | Students need to be prepared for such a student so that they can understand him. | 21 |
| | insufficient time/attention (e.g., other students receive less attention from the teacher during lessons) | Students with SEN constantly want attention, and this is a problem for others. | 19 |
| Teachers (f = 28) | lack of knowledge/competence (e.g., lack of specialised knowledge and training to support students with SEN, need for continuous professional development) | Despite additional training, I'm not sufficiently qualified to work with some students with SEN. | 28 |
| Support service (f = 18) | lack of expert support for teachers and need for more collaboration (e.g., lack of appropriate support from special education needs services, insufficient collaboration with external professionals) | The support from the school counselling service is insufficient for teachers. | 18 |
| Other (f = 3) | specific reasons | I'm afraid that it takes a lot of time to get to know students with SEN. | 3 |

*students* in the classroom can also contribute to teachers' concerns regarding the inclusion of students with SEN ($f$ = 40), particularly through their social exclusion or lack of understanding of such students ($f$ = 21) and the insufficient attention that teachers give to the other students ($f$ = 19). *Teachers* themselves can be a reason for concern regarding the inclusion of students with SEN ($f$ = 28), primarily due to a lack of knowledge or expertise, while insufficient *support services* are mentioned as many as 18 times in the teachers' descriptions. Finally, there were three cases in which teachers mentioned *other* concerns regarding the inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream schools.

**Teachers' self-assessed competence in working with students with SEN**

In this section, we address the third RQ, which concerns teachers' self-assessed competence in working with different groups of students with SEN.

The results indicate that the surveyed teachers partly agree that they are competent to support students with specific learning difficulties ($M$ = 3.71 ± $SD$ = 1.14), but they are uncertain about their competence to work with the majority of other students with SEN: physical disabilities ($M$ = 3.30 ± $SD$ = 1.24), speech and language disabilities ($M$ = 3.12 ± $SD$ = 1.19), emotional and behavioural difficulties ($M$ = 2.95 ± $SD$ = 1.12), long-term illnesses ($M$ = 2.87 ± $SD$ = 1.30) and autistic spectrum disorders ($M$ = 2.81 ± $SD$ = 1.19). The teachers self-assessed themselves as partially incompetent to support students with blindness and visual impairment ($M$ = 2.04 ± $SD$ = 1.29), deafness and hearing loss ($M$ = 2.02 ± $SD$ = 1.28), and intellectual disabilities ($M$ = 1.94 ± $SD$ = 1.14).

Finally, we analyse whether the teachers' attitudes regarding the inclusion of students with different SEN differ in accordance with the self-assessed level of competence: higher or lower. Teachers were assigned to the "higher" group when they responded with 4-partially agree or 5-fully agree, and to the "lower" group when they responded with 2-partially disagree or 1-strongly disagree. Comparisons between the "higher" and "lower" competence groups were conducted for all nine types of SEN (independent sample $t$-tests).

The results show that the teachers with perceived lower competence had less positive attitudes about the inclusion of all groups of students with SEN than the teachers with perceived higher competence. This was evident for students with specific learning difficulties ($M_{lower}$ = 1.70 ± $SD$ = 0.47, $M_{higher}$ = 4.28 ± $SD$ = 0.45;

$t$(111) = -2.58, $p$ = 0.00), physical disabilities ($M_{lower}$ = 1.58 ± $SD$ = 0.50, $M_{higher}$ = 4.22 ± $SD$ = 0.42; $t$(107) = -2.64, $p$ = 0.00), speech and language disabilities ($M_{lower}$ = 1.60 ± $SD$ = 0.50, $M_{higher}$ = 4.00 ± $SD$ = 0.29; $t$(108) = -2.49, $p$=0.00), emotional and behavioural difficulties ($M_{lower}$=1.77 ± $SD$ = 0.43, $M_{higher}$ = 4.09 ± $SD$ = 0.30; $t$(103) = -2.33, $p$ = 0.00), long-term illnesses ($M_{lower}$ = 1.50 ± $SD$ = 0.50, $M_{higher}$ = 4.11 ± $SD$ = 0.31; $t$(104) = -2.61, $p$ = 0.00), autistic disorders ($M_{lower}$ = 1.56 ± $SD$ = 0.50, $M_{higher}$ = 4.02 ± $SD$ = 0.14; $t$(105) = -2.46, $p$ = 0.00), blindness and visual impairment ($M_{lower}$ = 1.30 ± $SD$ = 0.50, $M_{higher}$ = 4.10 ± $SD$ = 0.35; $t$(119) = -2.84, $p$ = 0.00), deafness and hearing loss ($M_{lower}$ = 1.25 ± $SD$ = 0.43, $M_{higher}$ = 4.07 ± $SD$ = 0.25; $t$(117) = -2.82, $p$ = 0.00), and intellectual disabilities ($M_{lower}$=1.13±$SD$=0.46, $M_{higher}$=4.11±$SD$=0.32; $t$(107) = -2.80, $p$ = 0.00).

**DISCUSSION**

Teachers' attitudes and competences are considered key factors in the successful implementation of inclusive education (Protić-Gava et al., 2018). The present study aimed to identify Slovenian teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream schools, the concerns they face in this regard, and their perceived competencies for working with SEN students.

The results show that teachers are more favourable towards the inclusion of students with certain types of SEN, particularly those with long-term illness, physical disabilities, autistic spectrum disorders, emotional and behavioural difficulties, and specific learning difficulties. However, teachers still have significant reservations about the inclusion of students with blindness and visual impairment, deafness and hearing loss, speech and language disabilities, and intellectual disabilities. These findings, which indicate a mixed support for inclusion, are consistent with the international meta-analysis by Dignath et al. (2022), which assessed teachers' overall attitudes towards inclusion as moderate.

The differences in teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of specific groups of SEN students found in the present study are in line with previous studies, which show that teachers typically prefer the inclusion of students with physical or medical disabilities over those with intellectual, behavioural, or sensory disabilities (e.g., Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Jury et al., 2023). Teachers' reluctance to include students with the aforementioned types of SEN may be due to the greater adjustments required for them in teaching practices, making classroom management more difficult (Lemoine et al., 2024).

Such attitudes may also be connected to Slovenian educational history: the education system traditionally favoured segregated settings for students with severe SEN (Lesar & Smrtnik Vitulić, 2014), and there was an established practice of referring students with mild intellectual disabilities to special, adapted programmes with lower educational standards within the Slovenian school system. The fact that teachers prefer the inclusion of some groups of SEN students is consistent with the theoretical framework of "inclusion for some" highlighted by Leijen et al. (2021) and reflects the Slovenian context, where inclusion still faces significant challenges in practice, despite its solid legislative support (Mitchell, 2015).

Interestingly, the surveyed teachers reported similar attitudes towards inclusion regardless of their length of service. This finding is inconsistent with the results of other international studies (e.g., Lemoine et al., 2024; Charitaki et al., 2022), which have indicated that younger teachers tend to have more positive attitudes towards inclusion than their more experienced colleagues. This discrepancy with our results may be related to the findings of Lesar and Žveglič Mihelič (2018), who emphasized that topics on inclusion are underrepresented in teacher education programs in Slovenia, suggesting that teachers are equally (un)prepared for inclusive education regardless of their teaching experience. This finding highlights the need for targeted professional development across all career stages.

The results of the present study highlight several concerns that teachers have regarding the inclusion of students with all types of SEN in mainstream schools, specifically: educational practice; specific characteristics of students with SEN; parents and other students; teachers' knowledge and skills; and support services provided. Regarding *educational practice*, teachers expressed concerns due to the large number of students in classrooms and insufficient classroom space. Similarly, Protić Gava et al. (2018) found that structural problems such as large class sizes and unclear teacher roles make it difficult to fully support all students in the classroom.

*Overcrowded classrooms* limit the opportunities for individual support and can contribute to increased behavioural problems among students. Reducing class sizes and increasing classroom space can create a more supportive learning environment that meets the needs of all students, especially students with SEN. Furthermore, the overwhelming demands of the curriculum, combined with inadequate teaching materials for SEN students, are a major concern for the Slovenian teachers who participated in our research. These challenges emphasise the urgent need for curriculum reforms in Slovenia,

which should focus on manageable workloads and the development of specific materials tailored to the needs of students with SEN in order to ensure that teachers are better equipped for inclusive education.

Specific characteristics of *students with SEN*, such as disruptive behaviour, have been identified by teachers as an important concern regarding inclusion. Avramidis et al. (2000) and de Boer et al. (2010) found that without adequate training, teachers can feel overwhelmed in dealing with students' behavioural problems and find it difficult to provide students with effective support. The teachers in the present study also reported SEN students' specific difficulties, such as poor concentration and lack of interest, as a source of concern. They were also concerned about significant learning difficulties in SEN students, as these difficulties often lead to slower academic progress and lower student achievement. These concerns could be addressed by continuous investment in teacher training and resource development, as the success of students with SEN depends on factors such as teachers' flexible implementation of the curriculum and the quality of teaching adaptations (Kavkler, 2024).

In addition, teachers expressed concerns regarding *parents*: their unrealistic expectations, a lack of cooperation between parents and teachers, and the preparation of all students' parents for the inclusion of SEN students. Fostering cooperative relationships with parents is crucial not only for managing their expectations but also for understanding the needs of individual students. Establishing clear communication and partnership between parents and teachers can promote a supportive educational environment and improve the effectiveness of inclusion practices (Šrot & Rizman Herga, 2013).

Teachers' feelings of being unable to spend enough time with *other students* in the classroom due to SEN commitments and the social exclusion of SEN students within the classroom represent further concerns regarding inclusion. Teachers emphasized the challenge of finding time to devote equal attention and support to all students and to address social exclusion as a critical issue in the Slovenian education system. This finding is consistent with those of Protić-Gava et al. (2018). Fostering a classroom culture that values diversity and promotes mutual understanding is crucial to promoting inclusion and breaking down social barriers.

The teachers in the present study also expressed concern about their *lack of knowledge and skills*, including inadequate specialist training to support students with SEN and the need for continuous professional development. This lack is seen as a major obstacle to

the successful inclusion of SEN students in mainstream schools. This lack of appropriate competence for working with students with SEN is a critical issue that was identified among Slovenian teachers also by Rihter et al. (2021), but it is not limited to Slovenia, as similar reports were provided by Schwab et al. (2015) in the international context.

Finally, teachers were concerned about their *support services* and expressed a need for increased interdisciplinary collaboration within schools. They reported that insufficient collaboration with special education services was a significant barrier to implementing effective inclusion strategies. In line with Lemoine et al. (2024), the provision of ongoing professional support can significantly boost teachers' confidence and enable them to provide more effective and inclusive teaching.

The results of the present study indicate that teachers in Slovenia perceive themselves as only partly competent in supporting students with specific learning difficulties. This may be due to the fact that the topic of specific learning difficulties is better represented in teachers' study programmes at the faculty than in other SEN (Podatki študijskega programa razredni pouk, 2023), which may contribute to teachers' perception of competency. Moreover, this group of students is the most represented in Slovenian schools (MIZŠ, 2024), so teachers encounter their specific characteristics more frequently and consequently feel more competent when working with them.

Teachers are uncertain about their competence in working with the majority of other students with SEN (physical disabilities, speech and language disabilities, emotional and behavioural difficulties, long-term illnesses, and autistic spectrum disorders). The surveyed teachers self-assessed themselves as partially incompetent to support students with blindness and visual impairment, deafness and hearing loss, and intellectual disabilities. This is in line with previous studies (e.g., Lemoine et al., 2024) suggesting that teachers often perceive some groups of students with SEN as more demanding, as they require more individualized support. These results may mirror the aforementioned Slovenian educational tradition of segregated education for students with blindness and visual impairment (Djokić, 2016), deafness and hearing loss (Krvažić, 2023), and intellectual disabilities (Šmid, 2008).

Teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of students with different types of SEN differ according to their perceived competence to work with such students: across all SEN groups, teachers with a higher self-

assessed level of competence had more positive attitudes towards inclusion. These findings may suggest that improving teachers' competence could promote a more inclusive educational environment. This is related to the theoretical premise that teachers are more likely to utilise the potential of inclusive education if they feel adequately prepared to deal with the diverse needs of students in the classroom (Lesar & Žveglič Mihelič, 2018).

## CONCLUSIONS

The present study analysed Slovenian mainstream primary school teachers' attitudes, concerns, and self-assessed professional competencies regarding the inclusion of students with SEN. The findings provide concrete data on the current state of inclusive education in the context of Slovenia.

Firstly, the results confirm that teachers' support for inclusion varies greatly depending on the type of disability, a pattern consistent with international studies (e.g., Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Jury et al., 2023). While teachers in the present study generally favour the inclusion of students with more visible special needs or specific learning difficulties (e.g., long-term illness, specific learning difficulties), they express significant reservations towards the inclusion of students with sensory or intellectual disabilities. This finding highlights the presence of selective inclusion practices within the system, reflecting broader systemic or cultural reservations about providing extensive individualised support for all groups of SEN students.

Secondly, the study established the existence of a strong, positive relationship between teachers' perceived professional competence and their positive attitudes towards inclusion. Teachers who reported higher levels of competence in working with a specific SEN group also held more favourable attitudes towards the inclusion of that group. Conversely, when teachers self-assessed lack of competence in working with students with sensory or intellectual disabilities they also held less favourable attitudes towards their inclusion. This link is the central finding of our study, highlighting that perceived competence is an important variable for promoting inclusive attitudes.

Finally, the lack of significant differences in attitudes based on years of professional experience, together with widespread concerns regarding class size, resources, and support services, suggests a systemic failure in pre-service and in-service training to adequately prepare teachers across all career stages.

The study offers timely insights into the current state of inclusive education in Slovenia, confirming a strong link between teachers' perceived professional competence and their attitudes towards inclusion. The findings are important for formulating school policies and training programmes. It is specifically recommended to provide professional development focused on teaching strategies for students with sensory impairments and intellectual disabilities, as teachers perceive the lowest self-assessed competence in these areas. Although the study's strength lies in its focus on the current educational context, the small sample size and reliance on self-reports limit generalisation. Future research should examine the long-term effects of teacher education on classroom practices.

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