

Special Education Teachers' Attitudes Towards Learning and Teaching Learners with Complex Educational Needs

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ABSTRACT:

Learners with complex educational needs are included in mainstream schools in many countries. However, many of these learners receive rehabilitation rather than education. As teachers' attitudes influence the development of inclusive environments and teaching, this study aimed to analyse the attitudes of special education teachers who work with learners with disabilities towards the learning abilities of those with complex educational needs. Results of the brief survey suggest that 64.3% of special education teachers believe that learners with complex educational needs can only be rehabilitated, not educated. This highlights the urgent need to change the teaching approach, so that teaching is seen as guidance in gaining new experiences that contribute to building new neural connections, which form the foundation of new knowledge.

Keywords: complex educational needs, special education teachers, learners with disabilities, teachers' attitudes

1. Introduction

Learners with various disabilities have been included in mainstream education system in many countries for several decades (Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2017). Although the basic idea of inclusive education is that all children learn together, regardless of individual differences within the group, different frameworks for learners with disabilities still exist within education system in different countries (Lyons et al., 2016). Most commonly, learners with developmental disabilities are taught in mainstream school classrooms, special schools, or receive individualised programmes at home. In some countries, children with disabilities do not attend the education system at all but participate in rehabilitation and therapy in day care or community centres (Ministarstvo znanosti i obrazovanja [MZO], 2021; Banerjee et al., 2016).

Learners with disabilities in Croatia may attend different classrooms in mainstream school settings: a) mainstream classroom; b) partially in regular and partially in special classroom; c) special classrooms; and d) special educational group. Within these classrooms, they can attend different programmes: a) regular programme with individualised approach; b) regular programme with accommodation of content and individualised approach; c) special programme with individualised approach; d) specialised programme for acquisition of daily living skills and basic work skills with individualised approach (MZO, 2025).

Learners without complex educational needs (CEN) requiring adaptations or modifications at school (typically classified under severe or multiple disabilities) have been successfully integrated into Croatian mainstream schools for

many years (Martan, 2018). Teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of these pupils are predominantly positive. In contrast, the inclusion of learners with CEN does not appear to be accepted by teachers (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Even parents whose children attend regular schools hold the most negative attitudes towards the inclusion of children with profound multiple disabilities (i.e. complex educational needs) compared to children with intellectual or motor disabilities (de Boer & Munde, 2015).

Lindner et al. (2023) conclude from their review of studies that inclusion still depends on the type of disability, with not all learners being welcomed in schools in the same way. The complexity of required adaptations, as well as the preparedness of teachers to respond to learners' needs, can influence teachers' attitudes towards inclusion. This may explain why some research has shown that teachers and other school professionals can have negative attitudes towards inclusion (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Saloviita, 2020). Teachers in mainstream school settings, whose educational background is in teaching learners without disabilities, may lack the knowledge and skills to make adjustments for learners with CEN. Teachers with a higher degree and a background in special education are more likely to have a positive attitude towards inclusion (Sharma et al., 2008). Special education teachers (SET) in Croatia hold a four- or five-year university degree in education and rehabilitation sciences. During their studies, they acquire solid medical (neurology, ophthalmology, human anatomy) and psychological (developmental psychology, neurobiology of the senses) knowledge to understand the causes of disabilities and their effects on child development and functioning. In addition, they gain knowledge of different approaches to the education and rehabilitation of children with various types of disabilities. Therefore, they are equipped with the knowledge and skills to create individual educational plans, adapt teaching methods and materials, support teachers and families, and make suggestions for community accessibility (University of Zagreb Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences, 2025). However, even if they have more

knowledge about specific teaching methods for learners with disabilities and a positive attitude towards inclusion, do they truly believe that children with CEN (i.e. severe or multiple disabilities) can be taught to learn? Or do special education teachers and other teachers simply ensure that children with CEN are placed in mainstream schools? As teachers' attitudes affect their entire approach to teaching, the main aim of this survey was to analyse teaching professionals' attitudes towards the learning ability of children with CEN in relation to their perceptions of learning and teaching.

2. Methodology

The survey on teaching professionals' attitudes towards the learning abilities of learners with CEN and their perceptions of their own capabilities to teach these learners was conducted in two phases. In each phase, data were collected using an online questionnaire. Two different questionnaires were used to collect data from two separate groups of participants. All participants gave consent before answering the survey.

2.1 The first phase of the survey

The questionnaire in the first phase of the survey was distributed during a conference in Croatia. Participants were special education teachers working in either mainstream or special schools. This questionnaire contained only two statements. The first statement was: "Children with severe/multiple disabilities should be admitted only to rehabilitation, not education programmes." Participants could respond to this statement only with "yes" or "no". The second statement was: "On a scale from one to eight, please choose which you think is more appropriate for children with severe/multiple disabilities," where education only was represented by one, and rehabilitation only by eight. The values between one and eight indicated the degree of agreement with the need for education or rehabilitation. Although more recent work uses different terminology, specifically 'learners with CEN' rather than 'children with severe/multiple disabilities', the term 'severe/multiple disabilities' was used in our statements as this aligns with Croatian legislative

classification. Introducing the new terminology in the questionnaire statements could have caused confusion when describing learners.

Participation in the survey was voluntary. Each participant could decide whether to answer the questions. The questionnaire was distributed via a link and a QR code displayed on the wall. The Google Form questionnaire was open for one hour and was anonymous. Of the 100 professionals who attended the conference, 84 volunteered to complete the questionnaire. According to the list of conference participants, almost two thirds (64.3%) worked in mainstream school settings, while the others worked in special schools for children with various disabilities, mostly intellectual. However, as no identifying information was collected, there is no data on the workplaces of those who completed the questionnaire. Although SET in Croatia share a uniform profession and the same educational background, their work can be, and usually is, very different. SET in mainstream schools in Croatia support children taught in mainstream classes. They are members of the school expert team (expert associates) who support teaching but do not conduct independent teaching activities (European Union, 2023a). These SET support learners with disabilities in their schoolwork. They also assist classroom teachers in understanding the needs of learners with disabilities and in adapting teaching materials and methods. Additionally, they support parents of learners with disabilities in managing their child's education. The learners they support, who are taught in mainstream classes, have mild developmental disabilities. SET in special schools work with children with CEN. They not only provide support but also conduct lessons with these children according to the individualised education plans they create (European Union, 2023b). Learners with CEN who attend special schools in Croatia have a combination of severe intellectual disabilities, sensory impairments, and motor disabilities.

2.2 The second phase of the survey

The questionnaire used in the second phase of the survey was divided into two parts. The first

part consists of four questions about the participant's profession (educational background), the institution where they are employed, the length of their employment in the educational institution, and how often they meet children with CEN. The second part consists of three statements on a 5-point Likert scale about the education of learners with CEN (from 1 – strongly agree to 5 – strongly disagree, with increasing levels of disagreement). The statements on the Likert scale were intentionally presented in negative form: Children with CEN are not able to learn; The learning content cannot be adapted for children with CEN; and Children with CEN should be exempted from school lessons. The terminology of learners' CEN was explained in the introduction to the questionnaire. These learners were described as those who need a high level of support due to their multiple disabilities.

The sample of participants in the second phase of the survey was compiled using the snowball method. Professionals who had taken part in the first survey passed the new questionnaire to other professionals working in their institution or in other mainstream kindergartens, schools, special schools, and day care centres. Participants from the first phase did not complete the questionnaire in the second phase, as the discussion during the conference meeting where the first questionnaire was distributed might have influenced their responses in the second phase.

The questionnaires were available online via the Google Forms platform. All participants read the consent form and gave their consent by ticking a box. Only after providing consent were they directed to the questionnaire. The questionnaire was anonymised, and participants could opt out at any time.

In the second phase of the survey, 75 teaching professionals completed the questionnaire. Most work in mainstream schools (34.7%), followed by mainstream kindergartens (29.3%), special schools (21.3%), and rehabilitation centres (14.7%).

The professionals who participated in the second phase of the survey have diverse educational

backgrounds and hold various positions within their institutions. The positions they occupy depend on their educational background. Most participants work as SETs, having completed four or five years of university education in the education and rehabilitation of children with disabilities (30.7%). Additionally, 24% of survey participants are expert team members in kindergartens (psychologists or pedagogues). Lower grade teachers account for 17.3%, higher grade teachers for 10.7%, expert teaching team members in mainstream schools (psychologists or pedagogues) for 9.3%, therapists (occupational or physiotherapists) in rehabilitation centres for 6.7%, and kindergarten teachers for 1.3%. Only 13 participants indicated how long they had been working in their current position, with durations ranging from one to 27 years. Most of them meet learners with CEN daily (52%), many meet them weekly (18.7%), some monthly (21.3%), 6.7% meet these learners several times a year, and only 1.3% do not meet learners with CEN.

2.3 Data analysis

Results were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (IBM SPSS v.29) using descriptive statistics and the non-parametric test Spearman's rho to calculate the correlation between variables, as the results did

not meet the criteria for parametric tests. The figure was created using the Microsoft 365 Excel app.

3. Results

3.1 The first questionnaire results

The results of the first questionnaire show that 64.3% of special teachers working in mainstream or special schools believe that children with CEN should only be admitted to rehabilitation programmes. Only 35.7% think that these children can be included in educational programmes to learn academic content. As the data on participants' workplaces (mainstream or special school) was taken from the list of conference participants, it was unfortunately impossible to calculate the difference in attitudes between teachers from mainstream and special schools.

The results differed slightly for the second question on the same questionnaire. Here, most participants thought that children with CEN should be included in both rehabilitation and education programmes. However, with a mean of 5.77 (SD = 1.3), most participants still tended to favour rehabilitation programmes over education programmes (Figure 1), and none of the participants chose one or two ("education only").

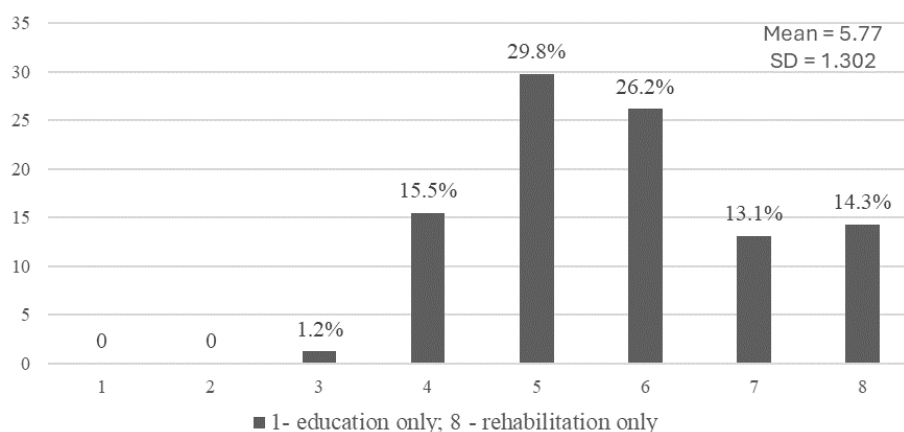


Figure 1.

Special education teachers' perceptions: Education vs. Rehabilitation of learners with complex educational needs

3.2 The second questionnaire results

When asked about the learning opportunities of learners with CEN, 57.5% of professionals

believe that learners with CEN can learn (Table 1). An even higher proportion, 61.3%, think that the learning content can be adapted. However, 52% of professionals believe that learners with

CEN should be excluded from education in a school setting (Table 1). The results show a significant correlation between all three statements, indicating that professionals who believe a child with CEN can learn also believe that learning content can be adapted ($r_s = 0.694$;

$p = 0.000$) and that learners with CEN should attend school programmes ($r_s = 0.448$; $p = 0.000$). Similarly, professionals who believe that learning content can be adapted to learners' needs also believe that learners with CEN should attend school lessons ($r_s = 0.571$; $p = 0.000$).

Table 1.

Special education teachers' attitudes on the schooling of learners with complex educational needs

Statement	Strongly agree to Strongly disagree					Mean	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
Learners with CEN are not able to learn	6.7%	5.3%	12%	18.7%	57.3%	4.15	1.23
The learning content cannot be adapted for learners with CEN	6.7%	2.7%	10.7%	18.7%	61.3%	4.25	1.18
Learners with CEN should be exempted from school lessons	13.3%	8%	17.3%	13.3%	48%	3.75	1.46

While the raw data indicate variations in opinions among professionals regarding the learning ability, content adaptation, and schooling of children with CEN – apparently correlated with their institutions of employment and educational background – these differences are not statistically significant. Professionals working in the mainstream system (schools and kindergartens) are slightly less convinced that children with CEN can learn and that the learning content can be adapted to their needs. Notably, professionals working in rehabilitation centres share this view with those in the mainstream system, whereas teachers from special schools are slightly more supportive of schooling these learners. Furthermore, expert teaching team members in the mainstream system are more in favour of exempting learners with CEN from their school setting (mean = 2.86; SD = 2.03). However, the difference between them and professionals in other positions is not statistically significant.

4. Discussion

The results of this survey show that most SET with a university degree in special education, working in either mainstream or special schools,

believe that learners with CEN should be included only in rehabilitation programmes and not in academic education. This result is surprising, as previous research found that teachers with higher qualifications and a background in special education had a more positive attitude towards the inclusion of children with special educational needs (Sharma et al., 2003; Hernandez et al., 2016). However, Saloviita (2020) found a similar result, where teachers who had completed comprehensive special education training held more negative attitudes towards inclusion than those without such training. These findings raise several concerns that require further investigation, as teachers' attitudes are important for the acceptance of and effort in teaching learners with CEN. Furthermore, special teachers should not only educate and teach learners with CEN but also advocate for their inclusion in school educational programmes. If they do not believe that learners with CEN can learn academic content and should be included in educational programmes, how can they advocate for them? This study did not explore the reasons for this negative attitude among SET. Nevertheless, considering that learners with CEN have only recently been

integrated into the mainstream school system, it may be that lack of experience and absence of evidence-based teaching methods make teachers insecure in their knowledge and skills (de Boer & Munde, 2015; Rix et al., 2009). Since SET are directly involved in the education of children with CEN, it is necessary to examine the reasons for such attitudes towards the learning of children with CEN, especially as they have extensive knowledge of teaching methods adapted to children with various disabilities, including multiple disabilities (i.e. complex educational needs). Another limitation in the first phase of the study was the lack of information about the participants' workplaces. Although all participants are SET, they could be employed in either mainstream or special schools in Croatia. It would be interesting to know in which school environment they work. In this way, we could analyse the differences between SET working in different settings, even if they have the same educational background. This could give us a better idea of the reasons for the attitudes we found.

Inclusion in various activities in mainstream schools increases learners' attention, enhances communicative interactions, and reduces challenging behaviours (Foreman, 2004). These are all prerequisites for learning. Therefore, it can be assumed that children with CEN will acquire even better academic skills if they are integrated into the mainstream school system. However, according to teachers' attitudes, it is likely that many students, particularly those with CEN, are merely 'placed' in mainstream classes rather than being fully integrated. Cologon (2022) notes a similar situation in several countries, where individuals with disabilities are placed in mainstream schools, but micro-exclusion persists. In such cases, learners may miss out on education. Nevertheless, the questionnaires from this survey collected data only on attitudes towards learning, not on what learners are actually taught in schools. This assumption should be further analysed to prevent non-educational practices for learners with CEN. De Beco (2014) analyses Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with

Disabilities and points out that this article was created to prevent violations of the right to education for persons with disabilities. However, the results of this study suggest that their right to education might be violated even when learners with CEN are integrated into mainstream classes. To enhance full inclusion and participation, schools must adapt to learners' needs. Architectural provision alone is insufficient for the full inclusion and participation of these learners. Daily routines should also be adapted to their needs, allowing more time for rest periods. Additionally, the classroom environment must be designed to meet the needs of learners with CEN. Sometimes these learners are overstimulated and become restless as a result. Therefore, they need a "quiet place" where they can calm down. In this way, learners without disabilities would not be distracted by their behaviour. Students without disabilities seem to welcome this practice, recognising that they are developing greater respect for all people (Caballero, 2024). However, students in Caballero's (2024) research also noted that learners with CEN did not really participate in the activities developed in mainstream classes. Therefore, even if the whole school is designed to meet the specific needs of learners, it is still necessary to consider the accessibility of academic outcomes for learners with CEN.

Another cause for concern in light of the results is as follows: If SET believe that learners with CEN should only be placed in rehabilitation programmes, it raises the question of what they are actually doing with these learners. Are they providing any academic instruction at all? There are many recommendations and ideas on how to set educational goals for learners with CEN and create individualised educational plans. These recommendations encourage teachers to teach daily living skills, work and community skills, self-determination, and social and communication skills in addition to academic subjects (Browder et al., 2014). Furthermore, authors have proposed various strategies for teaching learners with CEN (Erin, 2004; Rogers & Johnson, 2018; Zatta & Sacks, 2016). However, given the results of this survey, a valid question remains: What kind of goals are teachers setting for these learners? One

possible conclusion is that they are not teaching, but instead providing therapy to their students, such as physiotherapy or occupational therapy. Van Der Putten et al. (2004) reported results that support this statement. Although the learners participated in a functional curriculum, most objectives were formulated to promote the development of specific skills (Van Der Putten et al., 2004). Thus, learners with CEN can be considered to be involved in therapies rather than learning any academic content. This is very far from the social and capability model of inclusion to which we all aspire (Norwich, 2014).

The opinions of professionals in the second phase of the survey are slightly more favourable towards the education of learners with CEN. Given the high correlation between statements about learners' ability to learn and their inclusion in educational programmes, it is necessary to define learning carefully when training future educators for learners with disabilities. Most authors, even historically, agree that learning is a process of acquiring or changing information, knowledge, behaviour, skills, abilities, and so on, through experience, practice, study, or instruction (Washburne, 1936; UNESCO, 2011). However, many teachers in schools still define learning and teaching in the traditional way, as the transfer of knowledge from teacher to learner, often using the ex-cathedra method. This transfer of knowledge is often disconnected from real-life experiences (Marentič Požarnik, 2000), which is not suitable for children with CEN.

Therefore, it is necessary to revise our understanding of learning and teaching. In defining learning, we should emphasise the acquisition of new experiences. Studies have shown that each new experience builds new neural connections and forms new networks in the brain (Draganski et al., 2004; Chang, 2014). New connections represent new knowledge. Thus, learners with CEN, when exposed to new experiences, also create new neural networks, that is, they acquire new knowledge. Moreover, repetition is the mother of learning (*Repetitio est mater studiorum*). Repeating routines within these new experiences strengthens neural connections and helps retain new knowledge

(Kahana et al., 2024). Accordingly, teaching should involve creating new experiences for learners with CEN and engaging them in activities that form new neural connections and lead to new knowledge. Tellevik and Elmerskog (2009) discussed the importance of an activity-based approach and a five-step model in teaching learners with multiple disabilities and visual impairment. They recognised the value of learning in real-life situations (Tellevik & Elmerskog, 2009). Hence, academic curriculum outcomes must, and can, be embedded in real-life situations and activities. In light of the above, to promote learning, we need to promote guiding as an approach to teaching. As we begin to practice the definition of learning and teaching as guiding through new experiences in school, the role of the teacher will be to create an environment that encourages participation, communication, the application of acquired knowledge, and the practice of new skills. However, their role is also to create opportunities to learn academic knowledge in different situations, in the classroom, as well as in other environments (schoolyard, student restaurant, etc.) and with different methods.

The main limitation of this study is that information about the participants' workplaces is not clearly stated in the survey data. In addition, the number of professionals is unequal regarding educational background and workplace. Therefore, it is difficult to understand the differences in attitudes between groups in terms of profession and workplace. Comparing attitudes by educational background would be necessary to revise preparation programmes for teachers and SET. It would also be interesting to examine how the environment in which professionals work (mainstream or special schools) affects attitudes.

Finally, it is important to examine why many participants support excluding learners with CEN from mainstream schools. Mainstream schools may be unable to accommodate the methods and provide the activity-based approach required for teaching these learners. As many learners are supported by a personal assistant, they may not be able to participate fully with

other learners. Teachers might therefore believe that learners in special schools have better learning opportunities. This requires us to investigate the most suitable settings and all the factors that affect the learning of learners with CEN to meet their needs. Such evidence-based recommendations would help teachers create better opportunities and new experiences that match learners' abilities. Achieving this would bring us closer to a social and skills-based approach and further from the medical or rehabilitative model of educating learners with CEN.

5. Conclusion

Many learners with CEN attend mainstream schools. However, a common challenge is that these students often receive only rehabilitation rather than academic instruction. This approach potentially infringes on their fundamental right to education and significantly diverges from the social and capability models of inclusion.

The prevailing belief among many educators – that students with CEN can only be rehabilitated, not educated – necessitates a reconsideration of our teaching and learning paradigms. If we view teaching and learning as the creation of new experiences that foster new neural connections (i.e., new knowledge), teachers may be more inclined to integrate academic content into real-life situations and activities for these students.

To support teachers effectively in this endeavour, there is a crucial need for research and published examples of best practices in educating students with CEN. Such studies should explicitly demonstrate learners' capacity to acquire new academic knowledge and skills. This evidence would empower teachers to develop innovative approaches and pedagogical methods that genuinely support these learners. Ultimately, this should enable students with CEN to realise their full learning potential and uphold their right to a comprehensive education.

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Author Declaration

As the author, I confirm sole responsibility for the study conception and design, methodology, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation. I also declare that there are no competing interests.