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THE COMPETENCES OF YOUNG TEACHERS IN THE EDUCATION OF PUPILS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

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Abstract. *Introduction.* The present article considers the problem of readiness of young teachers to teach children with special educational needs in countries where the introduction of inclusive education began only in the last decade. The authors describe the key concepts of the theory of formation of professional skills and competences of teachers for working in inclusive education, based on which the results of research conducted in the Czech Republic, Poland and Russia.

The *aim* of this article is to compare the experience of young teachers in teaching children with special educational needs in relation to their skills and competences needed to perform this task.

Methodology and research methods. Questionnaires and interviews were used to collect quantitative and qualitative data, which were eventually processed using basic statistics (quantitative survey) and the open-coding method (qualitative content).

Results. The results of the study indicate both strong and weak aspects of the skills of young teachers in teaching students with special educational needs. In particular, a qualitative analysis of teachers' responses revealed some interesting ideas that can be used in the search for improvements in teacher

training, as well as in the support provided to teachers working with children with special educational needs directly in the school environment at the beginning of their professional careers. In general, it can be stated that young teachers in all three countries do not feel sufficiently qualified in terms of training to work with these children and are in need of expert support.

Scientific novelty. The results of the current research allow for the determination of some priorities in teacher training for the modern development of inclusive education in the countries examined.

Practical significance. The presented materials of the research can become the basis for developing a system of expert support for young teachers in the implementation of inclusive education, as well as new programs for preparing future teachers to work with pupils with special educational needs.

Keywords: education, pupils with special educational needs, schools, support to teachers, teacher competences, teachers' skills, teacher training.

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КОМПЕТЕНЦИИ МОЛОДЫХ ПЕДАГОГОВ В ОБУЧЕНИИ ДЕТЕЙ С ОСОБЫМИ ОБРАЗОВАТЕЛЬНЫМИ ПОТРЕБНОСТЯМИ

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Аннотация. Введение. В статье рассмотрена проблема готовности молодых педагогов к обучению детей с особыми образовательными потребностями в странах, где внедрение инклюзивного образования началось только в последнее десятилетие. Авторами описаны ключевые положения теории формирования профессиональных навыков и компетенций учителей для работы в условиях инклюзивного образования, на основании которой представлены результаты исследований, проведенных в Чехии, Польше и России.

Цель. Основная цель статьи – сравнить опыт обучения молодыми педагогами детей с особыми образовательными потребностями в отношении навыков и компетенций, необходимых для выполнения этой задачи.

Методология, методы и методики. Анкетирование и интервью применялись для сбора количественных и качественных данных, которые обрабатывались с использованием базовой статистики (количественный обзор) и метода открытого кодирования (качественный контент).

Результаты. Результаты исследования указывают как на сильные, так и на слабые стороны навыков молодых педагогов по обучению детей с особыми образовательными потребностями. В частности, качественный анализ их ответов позволил выявить некоторые интересные идеи, которые могут быть использованы для совершенствования подготовки педагогов, а также оказания поддержки учителям, работающим с детьми указанной категории, непосредственно в школьной среде в начале их профессиональной карьеры. В целом можно констатировать, что молодые учителя во всех трех странах не чувствуют себя достаточно квалифицированными в области подготовки к работе с такими детьми и нуждаются в экспертной поддержке.

Научная новизна. Результаты исследования позволяют определить некоторые приоритеты подготовки учителей для современного развития инклюзивного образования в рассмотренных странах.

Практическая значимость. Представленные материалы могут стать основой разработки системы экспертной поддержки молодых учителей в реализации инклюзивного образования, а также новых программ подготовки будущих педагогов к работе с учениками с особыми образовательными потребностями.

Ключевые слова: образование, учащиеся с особыми образовательными потребностями, школы, поддержка учителей, компетенции учителей, навыки учителей, подготовка учителей.

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Introduction

The current global trend of inclusive education brings a new challenge for many teachers in mainstream schools. However, the highest demands are placed especially on young teachers at the beginning of their professional careers. Suddenly, these teachers need not only to acquire all the traditional basic teaching skills, but also the skills to manage the specifics of the approach to pupils with various kinds of special educational needs. These are new requirements for young teachers, especially in those countries where, until recent times, the education of pupils with special educational needs has been provided separately in special schools, not in mainstream schools. In these countries, there is a need to find effective ways to prepare young teachers to handle their professional tasks in an inclusive school environment.

1. Inclusive education of pupils with special educational needs

The education of pupils with special educational needs is usually connected to a so-called concept of inclusive education. As many authors mention, it is rather difficult to find a common definition of this phenomenon, because the term 'inclusion' may have different meaning for different people [1]. Mostly, the idea of *inclusive education* is based on some specific values, such as fair access to education for all, opportunities for participation of all in community formation, and respect for individual differences and their equal human rights [1, 2]. An essential characteristic of an inclusive school is a focus on heterogeneity, which also includes a variety of degrees of need for support of individual pupils in a classroom. The pupils' diversity should stimulate the teachers' creativity, too [3, 4].

In any case, we can see inclusion in education as a voluntarily accepted and meaningful model of education, which ought to be associated with some personal enthusiasm of those who implement it in practice [5, 6]. For inclusive education, it is typical that pupils receive expected support, so that they can reach the highest level of results according to their individual possibilities, but the teachers and other staff not only help them – they also stimulate them to learn new things and be prepared for failure [7,8].

1.1. Pupils with special educational needs

Special educational needs (SEN) is a quite new concept which replaced terms indicating disabilities or disadvantages. The term was first used in 1978, in a report by the Committee on the Education of Children with Disabilities and Young Persons with Disabilities, but it was widely spread after 1994 thanks to the important documents of UNESCO that define the policy of inclusive education [9].

Trying to introduce a group of pupils with special educational needs, we can face a challenge, as this category is not clearly defined. Generally, we can imagine all pupils who need any kind of support in education, although there can be a lot of different reasons for that. Pupils with special educational needs are considered those who – as a result of various internal factors (illness, developmental disorder, etc.) or external situations (environmental or cultural and other circumstances) – are not able to successfully participate in the educational process without additional support in the form of using special educational approaches, methods or didactic tools, as well as additional assistance, counseling, etc.¹ [10].

It is clear that the large group of pupils with special educational needs is often divided into many subcategories; e.g., Lechta defines the groups

¹These include children with mental and physical disabilities and gifted children, street and working children, children from socially excluded communities or belonging to nomadic peoples, children belonging to linguistic, ethnic or cultural minorities, and children from less favorable or marginalized areas or groups of the population. Today, the concept of "special educational needs" has become part of the culture and educational policy in schools in most countries of Europe, in the USA and Canada [9].

of pupils with disabilities, pupils with psychological problems and pupils at risk [11]. According to Głodkowska, special educational needs “*result from an individualised way of acquiring knowledge and skills in the learning process, determined by the specificity of their cognitive-perceptive functioning. Special educational needs refer both to the group of children and young people with learning difficulties, as well as gifted students. Recognition of their needs allows the proper selection of methods, tools and didactic or educational approaches leading to the satisfaction of those needs, and thus creating optimal conditions for intellectual and personality development*” [12].

In our contribution, we focus on the situation in three European countries where the research on this topic was conducted: in the Czech Republic, Poland and Russia. A brief description of the current situation in the education of pupils with special educational needs in these countries follows.

1.2. A brief overview of the current situation in the Czech Republic

Pupils with special educational needs are entitled to receive expected support at all school levels, and this support is free of charge in Czech schools. Schools have to cooperate with school counseling facilities when assessing, recommending and implementing individual support for these pupils according to their individual education needs. Of course, effective cooperation with a pupil’s family is always important, and it is often advantageous to include some extracurricular activities and social services so that high-quality and comprehensive support can be provided for a child.

According to educational law, a child, a pupil or a student with special educational needs is a person who, in order to fulfill his/her educational opportunities or to achieve his/her rights on an equal basis with others, needs some kind of support in education. The support tools in education are perceived as necessary adjustments in the education process and school services corresponding to the health conditions, cultural environment or other living conditions of a pupil. (This includes the appropriate adjustments in school counseling, organisation of lessons, curriculum content, pupil’s assessment, the use of special teaching methods, as well as arrangements for admission to and completion of education for pupils with special educational needs, education according to an individual educational plan, and the use of teaching assistants if necessary.) The current system of support tools in the education of pupils with SEN is divided into five levels. The indication and practical use of particular instruments depends mainly on the level and type of SEN of each individual – but the higher the need, the higher the support intensity.

Nowadays, more than 100,000 pupils with SEN are educated in Czech schools – most of them in mainstream schools. In fact, each pupil is entitled to education in a mainstream school if possible, but there is still a system of special education (special schools) open for pupils with severe forms of disabilities¹.

¹The Czech Statistical Office (CZSO) website. Available from <https://www.czso.cz/documents/10180/90577081/23004219a.pdf/c369b3f7-87ea-4a32-8b17-cdf07b9ee-2a7?version=1.0>

1.3. A brief overview of the current situation in Poland

According to statistical data, there are approx. 200,000 pupils with SEN in Poland today; about 120,000 of these pupils are educated in mainstream schools¹. Pupils with SEN are usually considered to be those with a recommendation from a counseling center. It is obligatory to follow the instructions regarding support in education for these pupils (e.g. to develop an individual educational plan or a therapeutic plan, to guarantee some additional special educational activities, or to employ other professionals like a teacher's assistant or special education teacher). Pupils with need of a lower support level (those with specific learning difficulties, etc.) should be supported by adapting their working conditions in the classroom or implementing some additional activities (e.g. therapeutic, corrective and compensatory lessons), according to their individual needs.

The most difficult situation is faced by those who fall into a category of pupils with special educational needs, but have no recommendation from a counseling center. Although their educational needs should be considered by teachers, there is no guaranteed support for these pupils (even though a teacher, parent or other person who knows the child, e.g. a social worker, reports such a need)². In these cases, it is the school, actually teachers or other school specialists, who decide on a form of support implementation – but often issues of financing or a lack of specialists are an obstacle. Some teachers also do not feel obliged to adjust the teaching methods and approach to these pupils, despite the fact that according to educational law they ought to individualise their work with each pupil in a class.

1.4. A brief overview of the current situation in the Russian Federation

In the Russian educational system, the orientation towards inclusive education is one of the main trends over the past 10 years. As sources of inclusive education, the writings of L. S. Vygotsky are used, in which he pointed out the need to form a system of education where pupils with special needs would be seen as members of their peer group in the majority population [13].

According to statistics, the number of children with SEN increases in Russia every year, while the number of special schools and classes is slowly decreasing. Today, more than 160 thousand pupils with special educational needs are educated in mainstream schools – above all thanks to the initiatives of parents of these children that make an effort to defend their children's right to quality education and social inclusion within their peer group.

The implementation of inclusive education is actually enshrined in a federal educational law and a few other important documents (also connected to the educational standards and teachers' professional skills). As there has been a historically established wide system of special schools and institutions for teaching children with special educational needs, inclusive education is still in a process of

¹ Specjalne potrzeby edukacyjne wg SIO 2017, IX, wersja 5. Available from <https://cie.men.gov.pl/sio-strona-glowna/dane-statystyczne/niepelnosprawnosci-dane-statystyczne>

² Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji Narodowej z dnia 9 sierpnia 2017 roku w sprawie zasad organizacji i udzielania pomocy psychologiczno-pedagogicznej w publicznych przedszkolach, szkołach i placówkach

formation in Russia, and it must be scientifically and methodologically ensured. Thus, we can find there several models for the education of pupils with SEN today:

- Special schools and institutions for pupils with different kinds of disabilities (pupils use them on the recommendation of psychological, medical and pedagogical counseling facilities);
- Special classes in mainstream schools;
- Distance learning (as a complex of educational services provided to children with disabilities using a special educational environment);
- Home schooling (as a learning option in which teachers come to a child's home according to a specially developed schedule to conduct lessons with this pupil individually);
- Integrative education (in the form of *regular integration* – if children with SEN are able to acquire the basic educational skills and to spend some time with other peers regularly, or *irregular integration* – if pupils with SEN are included in various educational activities with their peers irregularly, at least two times a month);
- Inclusive education (if a pupil is included in a majority peer group by models of irregular, partial or full inclusion).

It should be mentioned that inclusive education has not yet become a systemic phenomenon in the Russian educational system. In most regions, there are only particular examples of good inclusive school practice, focused usually on some groups of pupils with SEN and some school levels [14].

2. Teachers' professional competences and skills

Pre-school and primary school teachers have always needed a wide range of professional skills and competences, as they must be ready to develop a lot of basic knowledge and abilities of their pupils. The structure of these skills is changing rapidly together with current technological development and transformation of society [15].

At present, the concept of so-called key competences is widely used in theories of education. *Key competences* are defined as sets of assumed skills, knowledge, abilities, attitudes and values which are important for the personal development of each individual. The selection and content of key competences is based on values accepted and shared within society. In fact, these competences are necessary for personal life and active participation in society at the same time. Besides this, there are some personal and professional prerequisites useful for good performance in the teaching profession which might be called *teachers' professional competences*.

Each teacher needs to acquire a lot of new knowledge and skills during his/her professional career, such as [16]:

- knowledge of the goals and content of education,
- knowledge of the broader context of a curriculum,
- knowledge of current laws and other important documents in the field of education,
- knowledge of conditions for pupils' learning,
- knowledge of pupils' development and needs at different age levels,

- skills for respectful communication,
- skills to use self-reflective techniques.

Generally, the competences for a successful teacher's performance can be classified as follows [17]:

- Professional competences (necessary for pedagogical, psychological and didactic preparation for teaching);
- Performance competences (physical and neuropsychological abilities of a teacher);
- Personal competences (appropriate social and personal characteristics of a teacher);
- Social competences (moral and ethical values of a teacher as a model for pupils);
- Motivational competences (teacher's identification in his/her professional role).

A few different categories of the main teachers' competences can also be found in Singh [18]:

- competences related to other educational activities;
- contextual competences;
- transactional competences;
- content competences;
- competences to develop teaching and learning materials.

Finally, according to Kyriacou [19], teachers' competences should be considered as essential skills necessary for:

- lesson planning and preparation,
- lesson presentation,
- lesson management,
- classroom climate management,
- discipline,
- pupils' progress assessment,
- teaching self-reflection and evaluation.

As he points out, it is always a challenge for a young teacher to develop all these skills at the same time.

We can also find models representing teachers' professional skills and competences related to some important parameters of the pupils' learning process, such as [20]:

- learning *to know* (cognitive activities),
- learning *to live together* (social activities),
- learning *to act* (personality cultivation),
- learning *to be* (evaluation and support activities).

The following seven competences (formulated in a holistic approach) are considered the essence of the teaching profession and the basis for teacher training [17]:

- *Professional competence* (theoretical knowledge in a relevant field, including expected talent, general skills in ICT, etc.);
- *Didactic competence* (using the teaching strategies in connection with knowledge of psychological and social aspects of education, knowledge of curriculum, knowledge of personality development and pupil's needs, etc.);

- *Pedagogical competence* (ability to meet pupils' educational needs, ability to support their personal development, respect for their rights and ability to assess the level of their development in educational activities, etc.);
- *Diagnostic and intervention competences* (ability to use diagnostic tools in education, to recognise social relationships in the classroom, to identify gifted pupils or pupils with SEN, to solve the difficult educational problems, etc.);
- *Social and communicative competences* (to ensure the safety of pupils and to develop their positive social relationships in the classroom, to address risky social situations and to analyse the causes of negative attitudes in the children's peer-group, to apply effective communication in contact with parents and other entities);
- *Management and normative competences* (knowledge of educational laws and other related documents, knowledge of conditions and processes of school education, ability to organise pupils' work and to manage the school educational process, ability to prepare learning projects, etc.);
- *Personality cultivating competences* (general cultural outlook, teamwork skills, self-reflection and self-development skills, adherence to the principles of professional ethics, etc.).

2.1. Teachers' qualifications and skills to teach pupils with SEN in mainstream schools in the Czech Republic

In the Czech Republic, teacher training is provided at the university level, although pre-school teachers may be qualified in specialised secondary school programs. Accredited Bachelor's degree is preferably required for pre-school teaching, while the primary school teachers need a Master's degree. In spite of that, have not been accepted yet – even though prepared and discussed for several years [21].

The proposed professional standards for teachers are divided into three levels according to teachers' experience: beginning teacher, independent teacher and excellent teacher. All versions of these standards would include the following areas:

- Personal professional development (professional knowledge and abilities, self-assessment and self-development);
- Educational skills (lesson planning, pupils' learning management, learning environment building, teaching process evaluation and pupils' assessment);
- Cooperation on school development (teamwork, positive school climate development, cooperation with parents, experts and other partners, with a focus on increasing the quality of pupils' learning).

In the teacher training curriculum, courses on special and inclusive education must be included, so that the graduates are prepared for work with all pupils in a heterogeneous group – even the pupils with SEN. Moreover, all teachers are obligated to pass some lifelong learning courses every year on topics which may usually be chosen from the list of accredited courses by teachers themselves.

2.1.1. Support for teachers in Czech schools

In some (but not all) Czech schools, we can find a school special education teacher and a school psychologist who provide not only direct support to pupils with special educational needs, but also support to teachers working with these pupils. During the last few years, some schools have got a chance to employ an inclusive coordinator (in some countries known as a special educational needs coordinator or SENCO). Unfortunately, this new position is not anchored in the Czech school system yet.

For all teachers there is support provided by school counseling institutions available. These are pedagogical and psychological counseling centers (focused on pupils with learning and behavioural difficulties), and special educational centers (focused on pupils with different kinds of disabilities). These institutions provide diagnostics of special educational needs of pupils, as well as recommendations and support to teachers and parents. In fact, the capacity of counseling centers is very limited; thus their support offered to teachers in mainstream schools is usually insufficient.

2.2. Teachers' qualifications and skills to teach pupils with SEN in mainstream schools in Poland

All teachers in Poland are required to get either a Bachelor's or Master's degree (depending on type of school level). The teacher training must be carried out according to standards (with an appropriate number of lessons in pedagogy and psychology, as well as internship and teaching practice). Since 2019, new standards of teacher training have been in force. The significant changes occurred in the system and curriculum of undergraduate university studies for pre-school teachers, primary school teachers and special education teachers, who are required to pass new five-year master studies.

Special attention is paid to teaching pupils with special educational needs and the implementation of principles and methods of inclusive education. The graduates of teacher training should also be equipped with necessary skills for teaching gifted children and pupils with different kinds of developmental difficulties (with respect to rights and needs of these pupils). Educational standards have been significantly adjusted to the idea of inclusive education, so that teachers should be able to work with pupils with different levels of abilities and coming from different backgrounds or living in different family situations. In any case, regarding pupils with serious disabilities, special courses within teacher training or even post-graduate studies in special education are expected. Currently, there is a need of specialists (such as special education teachers, school psychologists and speech therapists) available for support to pupils with special educational needs in schools, too.

The teachers in Polish schools are expected to be ready to handle the usual educational issues with all children in a peer-group. As for the key competences important in work with pupils with SEN, every teacher is expected to have knowledge of the specifics of the pupils and be prepared to adapt the didactic process to their individual psychophysical abilities – which means to use diagnostic skills, communication skills, and also creative skills to search for

various, and sometimes non-standard pedagogical methods [22]. According to some studies recently published, many teachers did not feel well prepared to work with pupils with SEN [23]. This might be one of the reasons why they are reluctant to accept pupils with special educational needs (above all those with intellectual disabilities) openly in their classes [24]. It seems that teachers at the pre-school level are more pro-inclusive, although they also do not consider their individual skills to work with children with special educational needs sufficient [22, 25]. In any case, as the number of pupils with special educational needs is increasing in Polish schools, the teachers are becoming more experienced and their attitudes towards inclusive education are also changing in a positive way [26].

2.2.1. Support for teachers in Polish schools

At the beginning of their professional career, teachers can use support from an internship supervisor only, which is provided for them during the first year. In fact, such help is focused mostly on lesson planning and curriculum topics. In addition, there are Teacher Training Centers working in large cities, where counseling support and courses on specific topics are available for teachers. These centers also provide courses on working with pupils with special educational needs.

In schools, there are self-help teams usually built for teachers' experience exchange. In the past, there was also a widely spread practice of open lessons for young teachers, so that they could observe the work of their more experienced colleagues. Unfortunately, this kind of support is not often used in Polish schools today.

2.3. Teachers' qualifications and skills to teach pupils with SEN in mainstream schools in Russia

The current trend of inclusive education raises new challenges in professional teacher training in Russia. According to some research studies, the ability and willingness of teachers to implement an inclusive approach is quite low [27]. It is obvious that the teachers need not only knowledge and skills necessary for managing inclusive school activities, but also the opportunity to develop their own professional and personal qualities as inclusive teachers – otherwise they might fail even in using their basic competences in an inclusive school environment.

Since 2019, teachers' professional standards require also the skills necessary for teaching pupils with SEN (knowledge of the specifics of the psychophysical development of children with various types of disorders, knowledge of special conditions and approaches in the education of these pupils, knowledge of educational methods and materials used in inclusive education, as well as the abilities needed for interaction within heterogeneous group of pupils in the educational process and for cooperation with psychologists, families, and others).

In recent years, a number of Russian universities opened teacher training programs focused on inclusive teachers' preparation. Historically there was a wide range of opportunities for special education studies; however, there is a need to prepare teachers in mainstream schools for the inclusion of pupils

with SEN today. That is a challenge, especially for institutions providing lifelong learning in Russia now [28].

2.3.1. Support for teachers in Russian schools

Young teachers in Russian schools experience the same personal and professional difficulties as their colleagues in any other country: lack of practical skills, difficulties in teamwork, low ability to cope with difficult situations in teaching practice, etc. [29]. Therefore, they need some kind of support and coaching at their professional field. The national project “Education” stipulates that 70% of teachers under the age of 35 will be included in various forms of support in the first three years of their professional career by 2024. Highly experienced teachers, as well as academic experts, should be involved in providing such support, which should help to increase the professional excellence of young teachers and the quality of teaching in Russian schools in general. Mentoring is considered one of the most effective models used for this purpose¹. However, it is not clear how widespread it is in Russian schools today, since only few studies on this issue have been carried out [30, 31].

In any case, there is almost no independent monitoring of teacher training programs’ quality and quality of university graduates in the Russian Federation today. Thus, the qualifications of future teachers are not verified in any way. According to a few research studies, university graduates experience a significant shortage of necessary skills, and, coming to school, they need various kinds of support. As the experienced teachers point out, their young colleagues have great difficulties in lesson planning, task selection, and teaching materials preparation. School headmasters also mentioned a low level of organisational abilities of young teachers and their lack of management skills. As for support, it usually comes down to consultations provided by more experienced colleagues at the request of young teachers. At the same time, this kind of assistance is provided only on a voluntary basis, although experienced teachers and school headmasters demonstrated their willingness to help their young colleagues [32].

3. Teachers’ competences for the education of pupils with SEN at the beginning of their professional career

In 2019, a survey was conducted in three countries which have some strong historical connections in the field of schooling – and there are still many similarities today (although they are on different level of experience with inclusive education, etc.): the Czech Republic, Poland and Russia. The research was conducted by three partner universities with the goal of exploring and comparing the level of young teachers’ skills (competences) for their work with pupils with special educational needs. The research was focused specifically on teachers of pre-school and primary school education at the beginning of their professional careers (up to five years of professional experience).

¹Mentoring is a process (usually direct and longtime) of transferring knowledge and social capital, providing psychosocial support, including informal communication, between a person who is supposed to have greater knowledge, wisdom or experience, and a person who needs such support.

3.1. Methodology

The research was carried out using two basic techniques representing both quantitative and qualitative approaches: a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. In the questionnaire survey, we used a modified scale questionnaire designed to ascertain the self-evaluation of teachers' professional competences according to Strykowski [33], which also includes a specific section focusing on skills necessary for the education of pupils with special educational needs. Respondents were asked to answer 27 items (questions) about their individual self-assessment of skill levels in several areas of professional competences by simple selection on a low, medium or high scale. As for the semi-structured interview, we used a template based on in-depth mapping of skills/competences areas, as well as the practical experience of individual respondents. The reliability of questions was verified in a pilot survey with 3 young teachers first.

There were more than 500 respondents participating in the questionnaire survey in total (approx. 130 in Poland, 150 in the Czech Republic and 220 in Russia). Compared to that, interviews were conducted with a small number of respondents in each country (as this qualitative part required fewer respondents but more detailed information): 6 in Poland, 8 in the Czech Republic and 14 in Russia. All respondents were teachers in pre-school or primary school education at the beginning of their professional careers (up to five years of their professional experience).

Quantifiable data collected in the questionnaire survey (proportional representation of answers selected from three-level scales to each question) were processed using the basic statistics (relative distribution of the number of different types of answers) using Microsoft Excel 2016. Qualitative data collected in questionnaires and interviews were processed using two basic techniques known from the Grounded Theory method, specifically the open coding and the selective coding [34]. With the consent of respondents, the interviews were recorded, and the records were transcribed subsequently. Transcripts were analysed using Microsoft Word 2016 and Atlas.ti 8 tools. As indicators for identifying relevant codes, information related to (1) teachers' skills and competencies to teach pupils with special educational needs, (2) their difficulties in teaching these pupils and (3) support available to these teachers in educating pupils with special educational needs have been captured.

We have identified the following main research questions which the research results are related to:

1. How do the teachers at the beginning of their professional careers assess the level of their professional competences (knowledge and skills) that are important for teaching pupils with SEN?
2. What difficulties (problems) do these teachers encounter when teaching pupils with SEN?
3. How are they able to solve these problems and what kind of support is available for them (and what support do they use)?

3.2. Research results

After data processing performed by using open-coding and selective-coding techniques, we may present the following results in particular question areas:

How do the teachers at the beginning of their professional careers assess the level of their professional competences (knowledge and skills) that are important for teaching pupils with special educational needs?

At the beginning of their professional careers, teachers in all three countries assess the following competences as the strongest in their personal professional readiness:

- Pedagogical and psychological skills, such as
 - basic skills to teach pupils in mainstream schools, and skills to support social inclusion of pupils with SEN into their peer group in a school classroom,
 - skills necessary for teachers' self-development and skills to acquire more knowledge for working with pupils with SEN,
 - ability to develop their own professional experience in school practice of teaching pupils with SEN;
- Didactic skills, such as
 - skills to teach pupils according to the educational plan and curriculum,
 - skills to adapt the educational plans for individual pupils (even those with SEN);
- Communication skills, such as
 - ability to communicate effectively with pupils (even those with SEN),
 - skills to communicate and cooperate effectively with parents and other colleagues or with experts.

On the contrary, teachers evaluate their competences as the least developed in the areas of:

- Diagnostic skills, such as
 - ability to recognise and assess educational or emotional needs and difficulties of a pupil and the reasons for these difficulties,
 - skill to assess pupils with learning difficulties and to recognise their strengths and weaknesses correctly;
- Special educational skills, such as
 - knowledge and experience for using an appropriate approach to pupils with different kinds of special needs,
 - ability to use special teaching methods and techniques – even those based on ICT (although the teachers generally have a higher level of ICT skills),
 - skills to use effective educational strategies in teaching pupils with SEN.

What difficulties do these teachers encounter when teaching pupils with SEN?

Although everything is obviously challenging at the beginning of one's professional career, most teachers admit a low level of their ability to recognise the strengths and weaknesses of pupils with SEN:

["It is challenging – I have to think several times if the tasks can be understood by an individual pupil with SEN, and I'm not sure..." (Respondent from Poland)].

["Everything is difficult at the very beginning of my career, but I feel I can finally manage the issues of teaching all pupils" (Respondent from Russia)].

It is hard for them to deal with challenging educational situations, especially when working on the issue of social relationships in a heterogeneous group of pupils (if a pupil with SEN is present in a group of peers). The young teachers would welcome the number of pupils in a class being significantly reduced, especially if there are one or more pupils with SEN included.

Often, initiating cooperation with specialists is challenging for teachers at the beginning of their career – in many cases it is not easy to find experts and their support available for teachers. The young teachers are sometimes lost while searching for new opportunities to increase their own skills to teach pupils with SEN. Generally, most respondents in all three countries did not feel sufficiently prepared for teaching pupils with SEN by their teacher training:

["In theory, we were well prepared, but school practice is different – and I can say that it's an irreplaceable experience for me..." (Respondent from the Czech Republic)].

["I am a qualified teacher according to my university studies, but I still need to draw new knowledge and experience; otherwise I would be not able to teach pupils with SEN at all..." (Respondent from the Czech Republic)].

["I was not well prepared by my university studies for such a situation; the additional courses and workshops helped me the most of all..." (Respondent from Poland)].

Moreover, some teachers also point to a clash between an inclusive school environment and a non-inclusive mainstream society which raises a tension in school education. This can be challenging for teachers in the case of working with pupils with SEN:

["We meet parents who do not want their children to be educated together with pupils with SEN at all..." (Respondent from Russia)].

How are the teachers able to solve the problems and what kind of support is available for them (and what support do they use)?

As young teachers are looking for knowledge needed for work with pupils with SEN, they often use relevant literature (scientific books and articles), as well as materials and other outputs from workshops and seminars. These teachers prefer a form of in-service training, and mostly short training forms like workshops and seminars. On the other hand, we must admit that there are not many quality printed materials focused on topics of teaching pupils with SEN which would be suitable for young teachers in practice and available in their mother languages in these countries. Therefore, many young teachers search for necessary information on the internet, which is not always a reliable enough source. Moreover, the teachers need personal help in many issues, too. If it is possible, they prefer to use support from experts within their own school or institution:

["I really appreciate that I can ask a school specialist to visit my class in case of need; I can receive just on-site support anytime..." (Respondent from Poland)].

Unfortunately, such an opportunity is not available for everybody (not all schools in these countries can employ experts like a school psychologist or school special education teacher, etc.). Thus, the most frequented and widely available support for young teachers is provided usually by their more

experienced colleagues. It is rather an emergency solution, and there can be a high risk that young teachers adopt some incorrect practices and habits, as the older teachers usually did not pass any courses on special or inclusive education during their teacher training. In these countries, integrative education of pupils with SEN has been supported after 1990 and related changes in teacher training were obligatorily implemented even later, mostly after 2000.)

It is true that support provided by colleagues is not always guaranteed, and many young teachers have to rely on themselves; in that case, they make their own attempts and mistakes – but they also gain valuable experience.

["In practice, I have gained more self-confidence and slowly acquired the skills needed to access the children with SEN..." (Respondent from Poland)].

What is important is that some teachers emphasise the need for creativity in their profession, as well as a positive attitude to pupils with some differences:

["If you want to be a good teacher in a mainstream school today, you need to be creative, open and willing to further develop your professional skills even in the field of teaching pupils with SEN..." (Respondent from Poland)].

["If a teacher wants to be successful in his/her profession, he/she needs to love all pupils..." (Respondent from Russia)].

Conclusions

First, we may notice that very few teachers rated their competences at a low level. Mostly the respondents in all three countries assessed their skills at a medium or even higher level (although in Russia most respondents considered their skills to work with pupils with SEN as insufficient and they considered the matter of specialists to teach these children). Generally, it might be said that young teachers assess their skills to work with pupils with SEN as average – mostly not too low, but not high enough as well.

We may identify a strong need for teachers to get a better opportunity to use on-site support provided by experts (special education teachers or psychologists), preferably on-site in schools, when teaching pupils with SEN inclusively. Although some kind of expert support is available for all teachers now, it is available only to a limited extent and mostly as an external service in special counseling centers or institutions (which means it is not available for teachers immediately in risky situations). Thus, the young teachers in all three countries use support primarily provided by their older and more experienced colleagues, although this kind of solution is not always reliable enough due to the previous longtime experience of older teachers in a strictly non-inclusive school environment in these countries. However, the young teachers are not able to cope in some difficult situations themselves when teaching pupils with SEN, and they try to reach any kind of support or solution. In any case, teachers' skills to work with pupils (even those with SEN) naturally increase with increasing practice, if the teachers have an opportunity to develop their experience with these pupils personally.

In summary, we can state that the teachers in all three countries do not feel skilled enough in the area of knowledge and experience in relation to

using an appropriate approach to pupils with special educational needs, nor in educational diagnostics of these pupils, adjustments in the teaching process for pupils with SEN, or dealing with difficult situations in a heterogeneous group of pupils in a school classroom. The teachers do not feel well prepared for teaching these pupils because their teacher training was not sufficient for that. Thus, the teachers must search for necessary information and additional training at the beginning of their professional practice (although a need for lifelong learning is obviously expected as a part of teaching practice). While the teachers in Poland are ready to pay for various forms of additional training themselves, in the Czech Republic the teachers are not willing to do that and schools or other institutions have appropriate resources for this purpose in their budgets. Especially young teachers from Russia are searching for the necessary information on the internet, while in the other two countries they use rather printed literature or materials.

Based on these findings, we propose the following recommendations for all three countries:

- To create a sufficient support system for young teachers, including good and easily available expert support in teaching pupils with SEN (including information support, supervision support, counseling support, etc.).

- To implement the appropriate adjustments in teacher training, so that the young teachers are better prepared for teaching pupils with SEN (internship system improvements, special courses focused on topics related to teaching pupils with different kinds of SEN, etc.).

- To develop a quality lifelong learning system for young teachers, including strategies to improve their skills useful for teaching pupils with SEN.

- To increase the number of quality materials (printed or e-docs) focused on related topics and published in the teachers' mother language in each country.

- To focus on pro-inclusive changes in the wider society (research and publishing activities, pro-inclusive policy enforcement, positive media coverage, etc.), so that teachers can rely more on the current social paradigm in their approach to pupils with SEN.

Finally, it is clear that there are some inspirational practices in each country that can be adopted in other countries easily. Thus, such international cooperation can become a source of faster positive changes in the education of pupils with SEN in these countries in the near future.

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