

USE OF THE INDIVIDUAL EDUCATIONAL PLAN BY TEACHERS IN SLOVENIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract: Teachers play a key role in the optimal development of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) by providing an inclusive learning environment. Strategies used for the education of pupils with SEN are typically based on an individual educational plan (IEP). Based on extant literature, we aimed to understand (1) whether primary school teachers were involved in the preparation of the IEP, (2) the extent to which they were familiar with the adjustments written in the IEP, and (3) the significance of the role played by the IEP in a teacher's daily work. Eighty-nine primary school teachers from different schools in north-east Slovenia participated in this questionnaire-based research. The results show that fewer than half of the teachers were always involved in the preparation of the IEP for the pupils with SEN they teach. A few reported that they had not taken part in the preparation of pupils' IEP at all. Furthermore, just over half of participants were familiar with all the adjustments recorded in the IEP. There were also differences in the responses to the research based on the professional title and experience of the teachers. The differences were in favour of teachers with more experience and teachers with more senior professional titles. We also found that most teachers believed that an IEP plays an important role when working with pupils with SEN and writing a regular lesson plan. Our findings represent the starting point for the preparation of education for pupils with SEN and act as a basis for the self-evaluation of a teacher's pedagogical work.

Keywords: Pupils with special educational needs, inclusion, individual educational plan, primary schools.

INTRODUCTION

In Slovenia, the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs (pupils with SEN) is carried out within the framework of the conventional educational programme with the help of an adapted implementation strategy and additional professional support (Schmidt Krajnc, 2018). Legally, the education of pupils with SEN is regulated by the Placement of Children with Special Needs Act, which was adopted in 2011 and applied in 2013. The Act specifies ways of guiding pupils with SEN towards various educational programmes, preparing an individual educational plan (IEP) for pupils with SEN, and facilitating an active role for parents within the guidance process itself.

Prepared in accordance with the aforementioned act, the IEP is an official document that represents the child's inalienable rights and binds

the educational institution to implement their inclusion. The IEP is a fundamental document for the implementation of inclusive education processes that is designed to aid in the development of each individual SEN pupil in an inclusive school. It is truly unique since it is designed in accordance with the characteristics of an individual child and is thus an individualised document. In fact, the focus of the IEP is each child's needs, and these needs can be met only if the necessary conditions in the environment are provided (Kiswarday, 2018).

It should be noted that an IEP can be comprehended in a broader framework without focussing specifically on the context of pupils with SEN. As stated by Rätty et al. (2019, p. 35), an IEP can be defined as "a written curriculum-based pedagogical document intended to support a student's learning process and growth." Similarly, Koßmann (2022)

recognised that the IEP is a document that supports instruction based on the child's abilities and needs. However, in many countries across the world, an IEP is widely used to document learning objectives and support mechanisms for pupils with SEN (Al-Shammari & Hornby, 2020; Rätty et al., 2019): this is one of the questions addressed in our paper.

Based on the importance of IEP for the development of pupils with SEN, as well as the lack of research in this field (Kozikoğlu & Albayrak, 2022), our paper focuses on the practical use of an IEP by primary school teachers in Slovenia. In the theoretical part of the paper, we discuss the IEP, its preparation, and its implementation in practice. In the empirical part of the paper, we present the results of a study that addressed the involvement of teachers in the preparation of the IEP, their awareness of the adaptations made to the IEP, and the importance given by the teachers to the IEP, especially when working with pupils with SEN.

Individual educational plan

In recent years, several studies (Daniels et al., 2003; Jurišič, 2008; Kiswarday, 2018; Končar, 2003; Koßmann, 2022; Pulec Lah, 2005; Rätty et al., 2019; Težak, 2006; Vučak, 2010) have highlighted various aspects and definitions of the IEP.

The White Paper on Education (Krek and Metljak, 2011), which provides a basis for the development of the education system in Slovenia, defined the IEP as the basic guidelines to be followed by teachers and parents in order to meet a child's basic needs. The IEP can be adjusted to meet the needs of an individual child and is thus of equal importance to both the child and the curriculum.

The definition of an IEP stated in Nugent (2002, p. 99) highlights that a conceptual understanding of the IEP is a means to and a context for the inclusion of pupils with SEN, as given here:

A written document, which is prepared by teachers in collaboration with others for a named student and specifies the learning goals which are to be achieved by the student over a specified period of time. The process of de-

veloping an IEP should involve collaboration with the students and parents.

McCausland (2005) and Kiswarday (2018) emphasised that the IEP should be regarded as both a product and a process. As a product, the IEP offers a set of guidelines to early childhood teachers, teachers, and parents for the purpose of encouraging and supporting the child's development and adapting teaching methods that will facilitate the child's best possible progress and their development as a whole. Even as a product, the IEP should be development oriented. We can claim that the IEP is a living process document that follows the progress of the child and their environment and defines priority goals, tasks, as well as strategies of support and assistance. The IEP is modified according to the child's current developmental needs, as well as their environment (Kiswarday, 2018).

Končar (2003) claimed that the IEP provides an overview of a child's strengths, needs, interests, and expectations with respect to their learning abilities and performance, which often differ from the requirements of the programme in which they are enrolled. For a pupil with SEN, the IEP represents an individually designed plan of activities, appropriate programme adjustments, and means of inclusion in additional activities. The IEP ensures continuity in the fields of diagnostics, planning, implementation, and the evaluation of the child's development, learning, and work. Furthermore, the IEP is a tool that helps professionals guide a pupil with SEN throughout their development.

Preparing an individual educational plan

The IEP is prepared and monitored by a group of experts, including teachers, counsellors, special and rehabilitation teachers, inclusive teachers, psychologists, and other professionals. Only those individuals who will be involved in the implementation of the education programme for the pupil with SEN are selected to be part of the expert group (Placement of Children with Special Needs Act, 2011). Since it is vital that each IEP is designed exclusively for the individual child, it is essential that

the child is involved in its preparation, as stated by Stančić (2018). Parents of the pupil with SEN can also play a significant role in the development of the IEP (Stančić and Matejčić, 2014), since it is the parents who are most aware of their child's character, issues, needs, and desires.

Furthermore, this group of experts can provide the pupil with a support system that can enable their holistic and optimal development. They are also responsible for creating an atmosphere in which the child feels safe and speaks without fear about their functioning, wishes, and needs (Težak, 2006).

The group of experts often face several challenges in practice, such as designing the IEP in a way that is understandable and functional for the child, including specifically defined goals that are related to areas other than academics, and making useful and appropriate adjustments for the child's optimal development and learning (Težak, 2006). Kiswarday (2018) noted that such group of experts can face difficulties given that there are no unified instructions or guidelines on how to prepare an IEP in Slovenia.

In conclusion, the planning of an IEP includes the collection of longitudinal data concerning a child's functioning and developmental factors in their immediate and larger environment (Težak, 2006). As we addressed earlier, the preparation and implementation of the IEP should be carried out via a collaboration between teachers, other experts, parents, external experts, the commission for the placement of the pupil with SEN in an educational institution, as well as the child themselves. The IEP should be clear, achievable, measurable, and focused on the child's development and progress. For all subjects involved, the IEP is a binding document that respects the rights of all children as directed by law (Končar, 2003).

Implementing the individual educational plan

Since children are constantly developing, the IEP requires continuous monitoring by the expert group once it has been put into practice (Nugent, 2005). To this end, the expert group must constantly observe the child and their key needs as dictated by their health or behavioural difficulties,

as well as pay attention to their abilities, interests, and potential (Kiswarday, 2018).

For the implementation of the IEP, it is important to plan regular expert group meetings (Opara, 2015). These meetings are essential since they allow all those who are involved to understand what progress the child has made, which goals have been achieved, which strategies are working, whether alternative strategies need to be introduced, whether there is a clear distribution of roles among the expert group members, and other similar questions that are crucial to the child's development (Nugent, 2005).

However, in pedagogical practice, the implementation of appropriate adjustments for pupils with SEN and an inadequate implementation of the IEP are often problematic (Rovšek, 2009; Schmidt and Čagran, 2014; Schmidt and Vrhovnik, 2015; Topolovec and Schmidt, 2015). More specifically, expert group meetings are not planned, and the lack of teamwork and evaluation within the IEP is evident (Košnik, 2021).

Evaluating the individual educational plan

According to existing legal provisions, professional definitions, and guidelines in local and international literature, as well as the findings of the Slovenian national evaluation study on additional professional support (Vršnik Perše et al., 2016), evaluation is one of the key elements that should be included in every IEP. Evaluation can be understood as the systematic collection of data on a particular phenomenon with the aim of evaluating and subsequently improving it (Marentič Požarnik, 1999). According to this definition, as noted in Vogrinc and Podgornik (2012), evaluation is the process of determining the extent to which the set objectives have been achieved.

The evaluation of the IEP is important because it allows the adjustments written into the IEP to be modified based on the child's development.

Aim of study and research questions

Teachers significantly influence the implementation of an inclusive school environment based

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample of primary school teachers

Variable	Categories	General teacher		Subject teacher		Primary school teacher	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Sex	Female	65	92.9	13	68.4	78	87.6
	Male	5	7.1	6	31.6	11	12.4
Years of teaching experience	0–3 years	29	41.4	2	10.5	31	34.8
	4–6 years	11	15.7	4	21.1	15	16.9
	7–18 years	18	25.7	6	31.6	24	27.0
	19–31 years	8	11.4	2	10.5	10	11.2
	32–40 years	4	5.7	5	26.3	9	10.1
	over 40 years	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
		M = 9.3	SD = 9.8	M = 17.4	SD = 13.4	M = 11.0	SD = 11.1
Professional title	No title	38	54.3	3	15.8	41	46.1
	Mentor	12	17.1	2	10.5	14	15.7
	Advisor	8	11.4	4	21.1	12	13.5
	Councillor	12	17.1	10	52.6	22	24.7
Total		70	78.7	19	21.3	89	100.0

M, arithmetic mean; N, numerus; SD, standard deviation

on their experience, views, and skills (Schmidt and Čagran, 2011). In addition, the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the IEP are some of teacher's most important responsibilities in the context of inclusion and working with pupils with SEN.

Due to their critical role in the implementation of the IEP, it is fundamental that teachers are actively involved in IEP planning and are familiar with its content: this is another aspect addressed in the present study.

Furthermore, the IEP is also important for teachers, because, as Robertson et al. (2003) note, it allows them to find ways to determine the type and level of curriculum adaptation for children in a meaningful and individualised way, as well as to personalise learning. Since the IEP is a significant part of a teacher's work with respect to pupils with SEN, we addressed this aspect in the present study.

Thus, it is clear that both teachers and the IEP (Bouillet et al., 2017; Rovšek, 2009; Schmidt and Čagran, 2014; Topolovec and Schmidt, 2015) play a crucial role in achieving the inclusion and optimal development of pupils with SEN. Hence, our research highlights an important aspect of ensuring an inclusive school environment.

The aim of our research study was to evaluate the use of the IEP by teachers in primary schools in Slovenia. Therefore, we formulated three main research questions:

1. How often do primary school teachers participate in the preparation of the IEP for pupils with SEN?
2. To what degree, if at all, are primary school teachers familiar with the adjustments recorded in the IEP?
3. How important is the IEP for primary school teachers in their educational work with pupils with SEN?

For the purpose of our study, primary school teachers were stratified into two groups based on to their level of teaching, namely general teachers¹ and subject teachers². We were interested in understanding the differences in the teacher's responses based on their work experience and professional title.

¹ General teachers teach students from the 1st to the 5th grades of primary school.

² Subject teachers teach students from the 6th to the 9th grades of primary school.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Sample

This study was conducted using a convenience sample of teachers employed during the 2020/2021 school year in different primary schools in north-east Slovenia.

A total of 89 primary school teachers participated in this research study. We selected male and female teachers with a range of years of teaching experience, teaching levels, and professional titles. The sociodemographic characteristics of the participants are listed in Table 1.

A majority of the participants in our study were women (87.6%), which is not surprising since teaching is considered to be a feminised profession. This was especially the case for general teachers, where 92.9% of participants were women (Table 1). Overall, 78.7% of the teachers were general teachers, while 21.3% were subject teachers. We found that the work experience of the participating teachers varied from six months to 39 years. Many teachers (34.8%) had only 0 to 3 years of work experience, which corresponds to the category with the least experience in the field of teaching. General teachers had an average of 9.3 years of teaching experience, while subject teachers had more experience, with an average of 17.4 years of teaching. Consequently, it is not surprising that little more than half (52.6%) of the participating subject teachers already held the title of councillor, followed by 21.1% of the teachers holding the title of advisor. A majority of the general teachers (54.3%) did not hold any kind of professional title and were considered novice teachers.

Data collection and analysis

For the purpose of this study, we created an electronic questionnaire with closed-ended questions. The link to the questionnaire was sent to primary schools via the eAsistent tool, which is used by schools in Slovenia to streamline and optimise communication related to school administration. We collected data over a period of two months at the end of the 2020/2021 school year. During this

time, we were repeatedly invited teachers from different schools to participate.

The obtained data were processed and analysed using SPSS statistical software, version 27.0. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used to process data. First, we used descriptive statistical methods for data processing. Then, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to test for deviations from the normal distribution, and we found that all variables showed statistically significant differences from the normal distribution ($p < 0.05$). Next, we used the nonparametric Kruskal-Wallis test to compare several independent samples. We also used the Kullback χ^2 test, as the condition for using the Chi-squared test was not met (more than 20% of the cells have expected values (counts) less than 5).

Instruments

This research is based on a questionnaire survey consisting of several sets of questions. However, only the IEP-related questions are relevant for the present study. The teachers were asked how frequently they were included in IEP preparation, how well they are acquainted with the IEP adjustments, and how important the IEP is when they work with pupils with SEN. The range of responses for the three questions included “*never*” to “*always*” for question 1, “*I am not familiar with*” to “*I am familiar with all the adjustments*” for question 2, and “*not true*” to “*true*” for question 3.

RESULTS

Primary school teachers who participated in the present study shared their experiences regarding the IEP with respect to the following three topics:

1. being included in the preparation of the IEP for pupils with SEN;
2. being familiar with the IEP adjustments; and
3. the importance given to the IEP while working with pupils with SEN.

Involvement of teachers in the preparation of the individual educational plan for pupils with special educational needs

Table 2. Responses of teachers regarding the frequency of their involvement in the preparation of the IEP

Variable	Categories	General teacher		Subject teacher		Primary school teacher	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Teacher involvement in the preparation of the IEP	Always	30	42.9	8	42.1	38	42.7
	Frequently	16	22.9	3	15.8	19	21.3
	Rarely	14	20.0	5	26.3	19	21.3
	Never	10	14.3	3	15.8	13	14.6
Total		70	100.0	19	100.0	89	100.0

We found that most primary school teachers were always involved in the IEP preparation for SEN pupils within their classes. However, the fact that this number amounts to less than half of the participants (42.7%) in the present study is alarming. More than a fifth of teachers stated that they are involved in IEP preparation frequently or rarely. One in seven teachers who participated in our study had never been involved in IEP preparation, although the group of professionals designing the IEP should include all professionals involved in

its implementation for pupils with SEN. Furthermore, we found that the answers of general and subject teachers were similar, i.e., most teachers (42.9% of general teachers and 42.1% of subject teachers) reported that they were always involved in the preparation of the IEP. It should be highlighted that more than a quarter of subject teachers (26.3%) reported that they rarely participated in the preparation of the IEP, even though they taught pupils with SEN.

Table 3. Results of the Kruskal-Wallis test analysing the responses of teachers regarding the frequency of their involvement in the preparation of the IEP based on their work experience and professional titles

Variable	Categories	General teacher		Subject teacher		Primary school teacher	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Teacher involvement in the preparation of the IEP	0–3 years	29	25.57	2	4.00	31	31.74
	4–6 years	11	40.14	4	5.00	15	42.60
	7–18 years	18	42.56	6	14.58	24	57.17
	19–31 years	8	42.13	2	12.75	10	54.35
	32–40 years	4	49.75	5	9.80	9	51.83
Kruskal-Wallis Test for work experience		χ^2	p	χ^2	p	χ^2	p
		13.854	0.008	10.974	0.027	17.288	0.002
Variable	Categories	General teacher		Subject teacher		Primary school teacher	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Teacher involvement in the preparation of the IEP	No title	38	27.50	3	3.33	41	33.61
	Mentor	12	41.50	2	8.00	14	50.14
	Advisor	8	42.13	4	8.38	12	47.79
	Councillor	12	50.42	10	13.05	22	61.43
Kruskal-Wallis Test for professional titles		χ^2	p	χ^2	p	χ^2	p
		15.813	0.001	8.577	0.035	19.521	0.001

Firstly, our focus was on the differences between the responses of teachers based on their years of work experience. The result of the Kruskal-Wallis test showed statistically significant differences ($p < 0.05$) in the responses of primary school teachers, as well as in the responses of general and subject teachers.

Considering general teachers, we determined that those with more teaching experience reported being involved in IEP preparation more often than teachers with less experience. Teachers with the least experience were rarely involved in IEP preparation. Considering subject teachers, we found that teachers with the least experience were not involved very often in IEP preparation and teachers with 7 to 18 years of work experience were more frequently involved in IEP preparation. Similar findings were observed when all primary school teachers were treated as a homogeneous group, rather than being divided into separate groups consisting of general and subject teachers.

We were also interested in the differences between the responses of the teachers based on their professional title. The result of the Kruskal-Wallis test indicates the existence of statistically significant differences ($p < 0.05$) for all three groups of teachers. As far as general teachers were concerned, those with the most senior professional titles, namely councillor, reported that they were involved in the IEP preparation more often. Teachers who were novices or had no titles were less likely to participate in the IEP preparation than teachers with higher professional titles. Similar results were observed for the subject teachers group. When primary school teachers were considered as a homogenous group, the results did

not vary significantly – the only difference was that teachers with the mentor title reported that they were more often involved in the IEP preparation than teachers with the advisor title.

We found that the extent of involvement of teachers in the preparation of the IEP varied, especially when their experience and professional titles were considered. However, we believe that all teachers teaching pupils with SEN should be involved in the preparation of the IEP, since this is the only way to make sure that all the children are able to reach their potential and receive a good quality education.

Teachers' knowledge of adjustments in individual educational plans

Teachers who participated in our research study reported that they taught both pupils with and without SEN. Thus, we expected them to be well acquainted with the adjustments recorded in the IEP. However, the results in Table 4 show that this is not the case. Just over half of the participating primary school teachers (53.9%) were acquainted with all the adjustments written in the IEP. The same was true when we considered the general and subject teacher groups. Furthermore, 41.6% of primary school teachers were only familiar with some of the adjustments in the IEP, while 4.5% stated that they were not familiar with the adjustments at all (in this case, these teachers were general teachers).

Table 4. Teachers' familiarity with IEP adjustments based on their work experience and professional titles

Variable	Categories	General teacher		Subject teacher		Primary school teacher	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Teachers' knowledge about IEP adjustments	All adjustments	38	54.3	10	52.6	48	53.9
	Some adjustments	28	40.0	9	47.4	37	41.6
	Not familiar with any adjustments	4	5.7	0	0.0	4	4.5
Total		70	100.0	19	100.0	89	100.0

Table 5. Results of the Kullback's $2\hat{I}$ test of the responses of primary school teachers regarding the IEP adjustments based on their work experience and professional titles

Primary school teachers							
Variable	Categories	All adjustments		Some adjustments		Not familiar with any adjustments	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Teachers' knowledge about the IEP adjustments	0–3 years	11	35.5	16	51.6	4	12.9
	4–6 years	6	40.0	9	60.0	0	0.0
	7–18 years	17	70.8	7	29.2	0	0.0
	19–31 years	7	70.0	3	30.0	0	0.0
	32–40 years	7	77.8	2	22.2	0	0.0
Kullback $2\hat{I}$ test for work experience		χ^2		p			
		17.786		0.023			
Primary school teachers							
Variable	Categories	All adjustments		Some adjustments		Not familiar with any adjustments	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Teachers' knowledge about the IEP adjustments	No title	13	31.7	24	58.5	4	9.8
	Mentor	9	64.3	5	35.7	0	0.0
	Advisor	8	66.7	4	33.3	0	0.0
	Councillor	18	81.8	4	18.2	0	0.0
Kullback $2\hat{I}$ test for professional titles		χ^2		p			
		20.469		0.002			

The results of the Kullback $2\hat{I}$ test revealed statistically significant differences ($p < 0.05$) in the responses of the primary school teachers regarding their knowledge about the IEP adjustments both in relation to their years of work experience, as well as their professional titles. Just over half of the teachers (51.6%) with the least amount of teaching experience were familiar with some of the adjustments, whilst a third (35.5%) were familiar with all the adjustments. All teachers who reported not being familiar with the adjustments were in the category of teachers with the least experience, while most teachers with 7 or more years of teaching experience were familiar with all the adjustments.

Furthermore, over half of primary school teachers (58.5%) without a professional title were familiar with some of the adjustments, and just under a third (31.7%) were familiar with all IEP adjustments. Only a few novice teachers were not familiar with any adjustments made for the pupils with SEN. Teachers with 'mentor' and 'advisor' titles were familiar with the adjustments: more specifically, approximately two thirds (64.3%; 66.7%) were familiar with all adjustments and a third (35.7%; 33.3%) were familiar with some of the IEP adjustments. Most teachers with the title of 'councillor' were familiar with all IEP adjustments (81.8%).

Table 6. Results of the Kullback $2\hat{I}$ test of the familiarity of general teachers with the IEP adjustments based on their work experience and professional titles

General teachers							
Variable	Categories	All adjustments		Some adjustments		Not familiar with any adjustments	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Teachers' knowledge about IEP adjustments	0–3 years	10	34.5	15	51.7	4	13.8
	4–6 years	6	54.5	5	45.5	0	0.0
	7–18 years	13	72.2	5	27.8	0	0.0
	19–31 years	5	62.5	3	37.5	0	0.0
	32–40 years	4	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Kullback $2\hat{I}$ test for work experience		χ^2		p			
		16.706		0.033			
General teachers							
Variable	Categories	All adjustments		Some adjustments		Not familiar with any adjustments	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Teachers' knowledge about IEP adjustments	No title	13	34.2	21	55.3	4	10.5
	Mentor	8	66.7	4	33.3	0	0.0
	Advisor	6	75.0	2	25.0	0	0.0
	Councillor	11	91.7	1	8.3	0	0.0
Kullback $2\hat{I}$ test for professional titles		χ^2		p			
		18.674		0.005			

General teachers' familiarity with the IEP adjustments show statistically significant differences ($p < 0.05$) according to their years of work experience and their professional titles. Half of teachers with the least experience (51.7%) were familiar with some of the adjustments, while over a third (34.5%) were familiar with all the adjustments. Over half of teachers (54.5%) with 4 to 6 years of experience were familiar with all the adjustments, suggesting that just under half (45.5%) were familiar with only a few adjustments. Most teachers with 7 to 31 years of work experience and all of the most experienced teachers were familiar with all adjustments.

Over half of general teachers (55.3%) without a title were familiar with some of the adjustments and over a third (34.2%) with all the adjustments. Among those teachers who did not have a professional title yet, one in every nine were unfamiliar with the IEP adjustments. Most general teachers with the 'mentor' and 'advisor' titles were famil-

iar with all adjustments. A third of the teachers with the 'mentor' title (33.3%) and a quarter of teachers with the 'advisor' title (25.0%) were familiar with some IEP adjustments. Nearly all teachers with the 'councillor' title were familiar with all IEP adjustments.

The results of the Kullback $2\hat{I}$ test failed to exhibit statistically significant differences ($p > 0.05$) in the responses of subject teachers regarding their familiarity with the IEP adjustments, both in terms of years of work experience or professional titles. Thus, these results were omitted from the detailed analysis.

Importance attached to the individual educational plan by teachers working with pupils with special educational needs

Table 7. Responses of teachers regarding the importance of the IEP while working with pupils with SEN

		Primary school teachers					
		True		Partially true		Not true	
Variable	Categories	N	%	N	%	N	%
Use of IEP	I find the IEP helpful when working with pupils with SEN.	65	73.0	23	25.8	1	1.1
	I find the IEP helpful with regular lesson planning.	64	71.9	23	25.8	2	2.2
	I find the IEP helpful with annual planning.	34	38.2	12	13.5	43	48.3
		General teachers					
		True		Partially true		Not true	
Variable	Categories	N	%	N	%	N	%
Use of IEP	I find the IEP helpful when working with pupils with SEN.	54	77.1	16	22.9	0	0.0
	I find the IEP helpful with regular lesson planning.	52	74.3	17	24.3	1	1.4
	I find the IEP helpful with annual planning.	27	38.6	8	11.4	35	50.0
		Subject teachers					
		True		Partially true		Not true	
Variable	Categories	N	%	N	%	N	%
Use of IEP	I find the IEP helpful when working with pupils with SEN.	11	57.9	7	36.8	1	5.3
	I find the IEP helpful with regular lesson planning.	12	63.2	6	31.6	1	5.3
	I find the IEP helpful with annual planning.	7	36.8	4	21.1	6	42.1

A majority of the primary school teachers (73.0%) claimed that they found the IEP very helpful both when working with pupils with SEN and with regular lesson planning. A quarter of the teachers (25.8%) claimed that they found it to be only partially helpful. Just under half of primary school teachers (48.3%) claimed that the IEP was not helpful for annual planning, while two-fifths of the teachers (25.8%), or almost one in three teachers in our research sample, used the IEP for their annual planning. Similar findings were obtained when considering the general and subject teachers groups. It should be emphasised that more than half of the subject teachers found the IEP helpful, while over a third of them (36.8%) found it partially helpful when working with pupils with SEN.

DISCUSSION

All children deserve a quality education: this can be achieved only with appropriately trained

education staff (Kukanja Gabrijelčič, 2014) who are aware of the importance in ensuring the quality of the educational process.

In addition to the teacher and other members of the expert group dedicated to preparing and implementing the IEP, the IEP itself plays a key role in ensuring the optimal development of pupils with SEN and represents a key document for every pupil with SEN. Due to the importance of the IEP in an inclusive school environment, teachers should be actively involved in its planning so that they can be familiar with its content (Kozikoğlu & Albayrak, 2022).

The present study allowed us to examine the extent to which teachers are actively involved in IEP preparation, the extent to which they are familiar with the adjustments made to the IEP, and the importance they attach to it when working with pupils with SEN.

The Placement of Children with Special Needs Act (2011) dictates that professionals who participate in the implementation of educational work with a pupil with SEN should participate in IEP preparation. However, the results of our study show that fewer than 50% of teachers are involved in IEP preparation for their SEN pupils. In fact, based on our sample of primary teachers, we found that one in seven teachers were not at all involved in the preparation of the IEP. These results are disturbing, since teachers work directly with the child and are therefore a vital factor in providing all the necessary adjustments. Moreover, the development of the IEP is a professionally demanding and responsible task – as pointed out by Težak (2006), this may be the reason why teachers do not always participate in IEP preparation. If teachers perceive that they are not actively involved in the IEP process, it is up to them to take the initiative to correct this oversight. Kowalski et al. (2006) suggested that general and subject teachers should liaise with the class teacher of SEN pupils, meet with the parents and the principal, as well as contact and collaborate with the members of the expert group and attend IEP meetings.

Furthermore, we found that teachers with fewer years of work experience and junior professional titles (or no professional titles at all) were less frequently involved in IEP preparation. We believe this is due to the fact that, at the beginning of their careers, teachers do not feel sufficiently competent to take part in such responsibilities. In order to improve the aforementioned results and to become competent professionals, we believe it is necessary for teachers to regularly update their skills to enhance their education within the teaching profession. In addition, experts point out that due to the increasing workload and constant changes in the field of educational studies, the competencies acquired by teachers are no longer sufficient for quality educational work (Razdevšek Pučko, 2013).

The active role of teachers in IEP planning is also important in terms of planning appropriate and logical adjustments. Each child has their own individual needs, and consequently requires different types of adjustments and professional help.

If teachers want their SEN pupils to achieve and progress in the best possible manner, they must provide the necessary adjustments (Guidelines, 2003). When planning and implementing adjustments, it is necessary to test their effectiveness on a regular basis, and this is only possible if teachers are familiar with the adjustments and include them in their educational practice.

The adjustments recorded in the IEP help pupils with SEN to achieve their goals. The present study ascertained that just over half of the participants were familiar with all IEP adjustments. The teachers who were not familiar with the adjustments were those with the least work experience or those without professional titles. We also found that most teachers with higher professional titles were familiar with all adjustments. This implies that the teachers' knowledge of the adjustments in the IEP is limited, and that this could fail to ensure the child's optimal development. Finally, it is essential for the child's development that the adjustments provided to the child by the teacher are consistent with the adjustments recorded in the IEP.

It should be noted that, as Fish (2008) points out, knowledge of the adaptations is not enough, but teachers are also expected to have the skills to implement the required adaptations. This was not tested in our study, but we believe it is an area that should also be addressed in future work. These findings also promote the idea that teachers should regularly update their professional skills, which also contributes to raising their awareness about the importance of adjusting the educational process.

Furthermore, we found that teachers perceive the IEP as an important resource for lesson planning and for working with pupils with SEN. Unfortunately, they do not emphasise the IEP's desired importance in annual planning. This is not reassuring, since teachers play an important role in adjusting the educational process and should, therefore, consider the child's individual needs during the annual planning process. Given the fact that the IEP can be used to determine effective educational practices in the context of pupils with SEN, as stated by Timothy and Agbenyega

(2018), it is imperative that teachers use the IEP in their educational planning.

In conclusion, teachers must be actively involved in the preparation, implementation, and evaluation of the IEP. It is the teacher's task to consider the adjustments recorded in the IEP, especially when they work with pupils with SEN, in order to plan and adjust lessons accordingly. It is also the teachers responsibility to create a learning environment that promotes the holistic development of all children.

CONCLUSION

An effective and high-quality IEP can be created only with the cooperation of all members of the expert group who provide a support system for the comprehensive development of the child (Košnik, 2021; Težak, 2006). Put simply, the IEP is a unique plan of educational and guidance work that aims to achieve a child's potential (Težak, 2006). In addition, one of the goals of the IEP is to both contribute to the realisation of inclusive education, which has a positive impact on the quality of the educational process, as well as to improve the educational opportunities of all children, which can be achieved primarily through excellent pedagogical practices (UNESCO, 2009). A teacher's readiness for inclusive education is an important factor in the implementation of inclusive practice, as well as the IEP (Ćwirynkało et al., 2018; Kiswarday and Štemberger, 2017). Although teachers consider themselves to be sufficiently competent to promote an inclusive community (Jeznik and Kotnik, 2018), attention should be paid to their professional development and training.

The findings of our research study contribute to facilitating a better understanding of the use of the IEP by teachers, as well as the ability of teachers to work with pupils with SEN and create an inclusive environment. In addition, our findings serve as a starting point for the preparation of further training and education programs for teachers and other members of the expert group, and as a basis for self-evaluation of a teacher's own pedagogical work. We recommend a detailed analysis of principals and counsellors who work with pupils with SEN in order to gain a better understanding of their role in the IEP.

Limitations of the study

The data collection process may have imposed several limitations on this research study and these limitations should be taken into consideration. Firstly, the findings cannot be generalised to the entire Slovenian population of primary school teachers since the condition of random sampling was not met. Secondly, the size of the sample limits our interpretations of the results. Moreover, the results are based on the subjective observations of the teachers and do not necessarily reflect the real situation, especially in the case of the frequency scale (*always, frequently, rarely, and never*). We are aware that it would have been useful to define the categories more precisely. Finally, the fact that this study includes teachers who were willing to participate on their own initiative could have an indirect impact on our results.

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