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Special teacher competencies in the context of inclusive school

Specjalne kompetencje nauczycieli
w kontekście szkoły integracyjnej

Streszczenie

W ciągu ostatnich kilkudziesięciu lat w wielu państwach europejskich i pozaeuropejskich wdrożono podejście kształcenia integracyjnego. Pedagodzy specjaliści kształceni są w celu zapewnienia specjalnego wsparcia edukacyjnego uczniom o szczególnych potrzebach edukacyjnych niezależnie od szkoły, do której uczęszczają. W związku z tym specjaliści muszą zdobywać kompetencje do nauczania dzieci o szczególnych potrzebach edukacyjnych wynikających, m.in., z niepełnosprawności, zaburzeń, czy też niekorzystnych czynników społecznych, aby zapewnić pomoc rodzinie i pozostałym członkom grona pedagogicznego. Badania miały na celu ujawnienie, w jaki sposób pedagodzy specjaliści pracujący w szkołach powszechnych oceniają własne kompetencje ogólne i zawodowe. Badania przeprowadzono stosując metodę ankietową. W kwestionariuszu wykorzystano wyniki w nauce (wiedzę, umiejętności i wartości wyznawane przez absolwentów) wskazane w programie nauczania przyszłego pedagoga specjalnego. Kwestionariusz wypełniło 100 pedagodów specjalnych pracujących w szkołach powszechnych. Badania przeprowadzono w szkołach powszechnych w różnych litewskich miastach w latach 2015–2016. Wykazano, że w kontekście kształcenia integracyjnego, oprócz zmian metodologicznych w szkołach, pedagodzy specjaliści muszą być otwarci na kształcenie ustawiczne i rozwój zawodowy. Koniecznym jest również, aby dzielili się wartościami promowanymi w ramach kształcenia integracyjnego oraz własnymi doświadczeniami w zakresie nauczania. Dlatego ważne jest, aby przemyśleć, zrozumieć i ocenić swoje kompetencje oraz potrzebę ciągłego rozwoju zawodowego. Dane z badań są również znaczące dla osób opracowujących i realizujących programy nauczania i programy doskonalenia zawodowego dla specjalistów – pedagodów specjalnych. Wyniki badań pokazują oczywistą konieczność poświęcenia więcej uwagi rozwojowi i/lub poprawie zdolności przywódczych pedagodów specjalnych.

Słowa kluczowe: kształcenie integracyjne, pedagogika specjalna, kompetencje nauczycieli szkół specjalnych, samoocena

Abstract

Over the past few decades, an inclusive education approach has been implemented in many European and other countries. Special teachers are educated to provide special educational support for pupils with special educational needs regardless of the school in which they learn. Therefore, these professionals need to acquire competencies to teach children with various special educational needs arising from disabilities, disorders, adverse social factors, etc., to provide support to the family and other pedagogical staff. The research aimed to disclose how special teachers, who work in general schools, self-assess their own professional and general competencies. The research was conducted using a questionnaire survey method. The questionnaire was based on learning outcomes (graduate's knowledge, skills and values), indicated in the curriculum of a prospective special teacher. The survey has been completed by 100 special teachers, who work in general schools. The research was conducted in general schools of various Lithuanian cities in 2015–2016. It showed that in the context of inclusive education, special teachers need to be open for continuous learning and professional development in addition to the methodological changes in schools. They also need to share inclusive education values as well as their teaching experiences. It is therefore very important to reflect on, understand and assess one's competencies and the need for continuous professional development. The research data are also valuable for developers and those who implement study programmes and in-service training programmes for specialists – special educators. According to the research results, it is obvious that much more attention should be given to development and / or improvement of the special educators' leadership abilities.

Keywords: inclusive education, special education, special teacher competencies, self-assessment

Introduction

The educational concept of competence is defined as a combination of skills, knowledge and understanding, personal qualities and values that has to ensure effective professional abilities (Caena, 2014, p. 312). Special teachers, like ordinary teachers, need to have pedagogical competence (Dingle, Falvey, Givner & Haager, 2004). According to the authors, in the context of inclusive education, all teachers – both special and ordinary teachers – should have the same competencies: respect for pupils' diversity, tolerance of differences; efficient and quality assistance to each pupil and a consideration of different educational needs. At school, special teachers play the expert's role (Keefe, Moore, qtd. in Quigney, 2009): they need to be able to provide methodological and consultative support for the teachers, the pupil's parents, develop tolerance of the school community towards diversity, and ultimately, provide educational assistance to the child. Some special teacher's competencies require specific knowledge and abilities (Dingle et al., 2004, p. 46) related to children's special educational needs, disabilities, teaching methods, knowledge of legal provisions and the like.

Fisher, Frey & Thousand (2003, p. 46) described special educators' responsibilities as collaborative teaming and teaching, curricular and instructional modifications and accommodations, personal support, assistive technology, and positive behavioural support. The authors admitted, that every special education teacher needs to have

relevant knowledge in subjects such as native language, science, maths, social studies, arts, and the vocational curriculum in order to provide accommodations, modifications, and personal support (Fisher et al., 2003, p. 44).

The most important special educator's competencies are similarly understood in Lithuania too. Complex and versatile special educator's activities require both specific professional and general (social, personal) abilities and they must have high level specific professional and general competencies. For many years, in many countries special teachers were educated to work in special schools. In recent decades, in Lithuania and other countries, special teachers are educated to provide special educational assistance for children with special educational needs (SEN), regardless of the school in which children are educated. Therefore, special teachers need to acquire competencies to teach children with diverse special educational needs related to disabilities, disorders, adverse social factors and the like. Special teacher training in Lithuania is based on competencies necessary to work with diverse children in inclusive settings and to ensure the social participation of all children. Requirements for the professional education of educational support staff are focused on readiness to:

- » Work in a mainstream as well as in a special school;
- » Educate children with SEN related to developmental difficulties, disorders, disabilities or social factors;
- » Work with a wide range age of children – from birth to 21 years of age;
- » Work in a team with other professionals, parents, and institutions;
- » Coordinate the process of meeting special educational needs at individual, team, institutional, and inter-institutional levels.

The curriculum for teacher and educational support staff, e.g., special teachers, can be characterised not only by the new content and subject competencies but also by the focus on personal competencies, such as values and attitudes. The methodology of teacher education in Lithuania is based on the European approach and scientific findings¹, which emphasise that the main aim of initial teacher education is to prepare people to enter a profession, which accepts individual and collective responsibility for improving the learning and participation of all children (Florian & Rouse, 2009, p. 596). Teachers play an essential role in quality education. The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers (Savolainen, 2009, p. 16). Teachers play a key role in preparing children to take their place in society. Teachers in particular need the skills necessary to²:

- » Identify the specific needs of each individual learner and respond to them by deploying a wide range of teaching strategies;
- » Support the development of young people into fully autonomous lifelong learners;
- » Help young people to acquire the competencies listed in the European Reference Framework of Key Competences;
- » Work in multicultural settings, including an understanding of the value of diversity, and respect for difference;
- » Work in close cooperation with colleagues, parents, and a wider community.

1 European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2009).

2 Ibid.

In addition, there is evident focus on the need for teacher education to develop reflective practitioners (Barrett & Green, 2009). According to Fisher et al. (2003, p. 46), the role of the inclusive teacher is to create accommodations and modifications that maintain the integrity of the lesson while addressing the unique learning needs of the student. In the context of inclusive education, all teachers – both special and ordinary teachers – have to share knowledge and experience, and create joint team competence in order to better meet pupils' diverse educational needs. The National Education Strategy 2013–2022³ outlined new requirements for teacher training, which are as follows: an integral teacher training and qualification upgrading system shall be developed; training should be oriented towards the changing role of a teacher in a knowledge society, new competences and values necessary for a contemporary teacher. In this context, it is important that competencies acquired by special teachers should correspond to both national and international contexts.

The relevance of this research has been defined by problem questions: What competencies are most relevant to a special teacher in the inclusive school? How do special teachers assess their own competence? Answers to these questions may be beneficial for preparing prospective special teachers and improving study programmes.

- » **The research subject:** self-assessment of special teachers' specific and general competencies.
- » **The research aim:** to reveal how special teachers self-assess their own professional and general competencies, and what improvement of professional abilities they highlight.
- » **Research methods:** literature review and document analysis, and questionnaire survey. Quantitative and qualitative (content) analysis of the research data has been applied.

The empirical research employed the questionnaire survey method. The questionnaire was designed on the basis of learning outcomes indicated in the curriculum of special education, describing the graduate's knowledge, abilities and values.

The respondents of the survey had to note the importance of listed professional competencies using a five-point Likert Scale: 1 – not important at all; 2 – not important; 3 – I do not know, I have no opinion; 4 – important; 5 – very important. Respondents were asked to self-assess levels of their professionalism (own professional and general competencies): 1 – poorly manifesting competency; 2 – satisfactory level of competency; 3 – I do not know, I cannot answer; 4 – good level of competency; 5 – very good level of competency.

Quantitative research data were processed applying descriptive statistical methods: calculations of means and standard deviations of responses (Mean, St. Dev.); exploratory factor analysis, extraction method – principal component analysis; rotation method – Oblimin with Kaiser Normalization (KMO and Bartlett's Test df, p, Cronbach α). Qualitative data – answers to open-ended questionnaire questions – were processed using the content analysis method.

The research was conducted in accordance with the principles of research ethics. The aim of the research was explained to the respondents, and anonymity and voluntarism was guaranteed.

³ Lithuania: *National Reform Programme, 2012. National Education Strategy 2013–2022.*

Respondents

The research employed a random targeted selection of schools and respondents: random selection was applied for choosing general schools, and targeted random sampling method was applied to select special teachers, who work in general schools.

The survey involved 100 special teachers. The research was conducted in 2015–2016. The research involved equal shares (14 percent in each) of 31–35 year old and 55–60 year old respondents; 13 percent of respondents were 41–45 years old; most of the respondents – specialists aged 36–40 (19 percent) and 46–51 (24 percent). The smaller share of the respondents were persons under 25 (3 percent of respondents), 61 years old and over (5 percent), and 26–30 years old (8 percent). Almost half (45 percent) of respondents graduated 16 years ago and formerly, one-fifth of the respondents graduated 11–15 years ago (22 percent), and one-fifth, 6–10 years ago (20 percent). The smallest share of respondents (13 percent) graduated not more than 5 years ago. Almost a quarter (23 percent) of respondents had 5–10 years special teacher’s seniority; 16 percent of respondents had seniority of 26–30 years, 16 per percent of 11–15 years; 10 percent of respondents – 31 and more years.

Research Results

Assessment of importance of professional competencies. Special teachers evaluated the importance of specific knowledge, abilities and skills, which are necessary for their daily professional work. They also self-evaluated levels of their own professionalism in this area.

The research data illustrates how special teachers have mastered the most important professional knowledge, abilities and skills. The research data is expressed in means of the answers (see Table 1).

Table 1. Self-Assessed Importance of Special Teacher Competencies

Special teacher professional competencies	Importance of competencies		Self-assessment of competencies	
	Mean	St. Dev.	Mean	St. Dev.
The ability to choose subject teaching methods and tasks, considering the level of the children special educational needs.	4,89	0,35	4,51	0,61
To identify children’s developmental and special educational needs.	4,87	0,37	4,34	0,69
To develop an individual curriculum.	4,86	0,40	4,43	0,73
To perform psycho-pedagogical assessment of the child’s development.	4,84	0,37	4,17	0,91

Special teacher professional competencies	Importance of competencies		Self-assessment of competencies	
	Mean	St. Dev.	Mean	St. Dev.
To provide individual special educational support in the classroom, considering the child's possibilities and needs.	4,84	0,39	4,34	0,69
To modify the curriculum according to the child's educational needs.	4,82	0,54	4,43	0,82
Knowledge in disabilities, disorders and learning difficulties.	4,81	0,46	4,24	0,69
Knowledge of psycho-pedagogical assessment principles and criteria.	4,78	0,44	4,06	0,93
The ability to support the teacher to choose individual teaching methods and tasks.	4,77	0,42	4,29	0,79
To identify levels of special educational needs of children.	4,77	0,55	4,27	0,80
To help the teacher to understand children's possibilities.	4,76	0,45	4,36	0,73
To prepare individual curricula for the development of cognitive abilities.	4,75	0,56	4,29	0,83
To support the teacher in developing a modified or individual curriculum.	4,73	0,47	4,34	0,69
To be aware of innovative education, legal regulations of inclusive and special education.	4,64	0,48	3,98	0,88
To analyse and critically assess processes and trends of Lithuanian and European education systems, and changes in special education.	4,30	0,83	3,70	0,95

Source: own research.

The research data showed that all listed professional competencies were very important for the participants (special teachers). However, professional abilities that are relatively most important and relevant for the majority of special teachers are (the mean of answers from 4.86 to 4.89) are: 1) *to identify children's developmental and special educational needs*; 2) *to choose teaching methods and tasks, considering the level of children SEN*; 3) *to prepare individual educational programmes*.

The majority of special teachers confirmed that their abilities as mentioned above are good and very good: self-assessment means are from 4.43 (*to prepare the individual curriculum*) to 4.51 (*to choose teaching methods, tasks, considering the level of the pupil's special educational needs*).

Assessment of social and personal competencies necessary for the special teacher. A number of studies that examined special teachers' readiness to work in an

inclusive school emphasised the importance of both professional competencies and general and transferable competencies. “Social competence is linked to personal and social well-being ... The core skills of this competence include the ability to communicate constructively in different environments, to show tolerance, express and understand different viewpoints,... should value diversity and respect others, and be prepared both to overcome prejudices and to compromise” (Council, EU, 2006).

Thus, general competencies (communication and interaction, collaboration, leadership) and inclusive education attitudes, values and beliefs are an integral part of the special teachers’ professional competencies (Council for Exceptional Children, 2015).

In order to assess the importance of general (social and personal) competencies in the special teacher’s daily work, respondents were asked to note their importance in the given list of competencies and to self-assess their possessed social and personal competencies. Research data (means of answers) are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Special Teacher’s Social and Personal Competencies

Special teacher social and personal competencies	Importance of competencies		Self-assessment of competencies	
	Mean	St. Dev.	Mean	St. Dev.
To constructively interact and collaborate with pupils, their parents, teachers and educational support professionals.	4,84	0,36	4,32	0,80
To communicate with children or adults with special (educational) needs.	4,83	0,37	4,50	0,61
To provide support to colleagues addressing pupils’ interaction problems and conflicts, to increase the efficiency of communication in order to improve the microclimate in the classroom.	4,69	0,48	4,12	0,70
To cooperate with the institutions providing support to the child and family.	4,69	0,46	4,19	0,69
Intention of continuous learning, openness to change.	4,65	0,64	4,32	0,76
Respect and tolerance for diversity and individual differences: social, cultural, religious, ethnic.	4,60	0,65	4,36	0,85
To share with inspiring practices, inter-institutional events and projects, advise colleagues on value matters of inclusive education.	4,58	0,57	3,94	0,83
To reflectively self-assess knowledge and abilities of professional activities, and professional development prospects.	4,49	0,65	4,09	0,74
To assume a leadership role, demonstrate innovation, and encourage colleagues to share ideas and inspiring practices, and motivate team members.	4,33	0,69	3,61	0,96

Special teacher social and personal competencies	Importance of competencies		Self-assessment of competencies	
	Mean	St. Dev.	Mean	St. Dev.
To communicate in the national and foreign languages, disseminate and interpret professional activity ideas and facts.	4,26	0,81	3,64	1,01

Source: own research.

'Special educators are expected to be skilful in collaborative relationships, perhaps even being the initiators or maintainers, conducting and communicating complex assessments, designing and implementing individualised programmes, and managing or coordinating other professionals such as para-educators' (Dingle et al., 2004, p. 46).

In the opinion of the majority of respondents, very important special teacher social abilities are:

- 1) *Constructive interaction and collaboration with pupils, their parents, teachers, education support staff* (M = 4.84);
- 2) *Communication with persons with special educational needs* (M = 4.83);
- 3) *Provision of support to colleagues solving pupils' interaction problems and conflicts, improving the microclimate in the classroom, and collaboration with institutions providing support to a child and a family* (M = 4.69).

The survey data showed that special teachers who work in inclusive school need to demonstrate the abilities as follow: an *intention of continuous learning, and openness to change* (M = 4.65); inclusive education values (*respect and tolerance for individual differences – social, cultural, religious, ethnic*, M = 4.6); share with inspiring practices; share values of inclusive education; provide *advice to colleagues on value matters of inclusive education* (M = 4.58). The ability to *communicate with persons with special educational needs* was appreciated as best (as very good) (M = 4.5) acquired. The majority of respondents self-assessed the interaction and collaboration competencies as good: *to constructively interact and collaborate with pupils, their parents, teachers and education support professionals* (M = 4.32); *to collaborate with institutions providing support to the child and family* (M = 4.19); *to provide support to colleagues solving childrens' interaction problems and conflicts in order to improve the microclimate in the classroom* (M = 4.12).

Although respondents acknowledged that the leadership competency was important for special teachers, the self-assessment of the competencies namely of this area was the weakest: for example, the abilities *to assume the leadership role, demonstrate innovation, encourage colleagues to share ideas and good professional practice, motivate team members* were valued only as average (M = 3.61).

Special teachers who took part in the research were given an open-ended question about what they felt personally was the most relevant competency development need. The open-ended question was answered by 86 respondents. The content analysis of the comments to the open-ended question resulted in categories of statements reflecting the needs of developing social, personal and specific professional competencies. The data of the content analysis of answers is presented in Tables 3–5.

According to the research data, the majority of special teachers found it relevant to improve their own social competencies: *collaboration and interaction; communication; sharing experiences* (see Table 3).

Table 3. The Needs of Improving Social Competencies

Subcategory	Examples of statements	No. of statement
<i>Collaboration and interaction</i>	<i>... improvement of collaboration skills // Special teacher must constantly improve while interacting and collaborating,...//... interaction and collaboration among teachers and special teachers of your city and other cities. // Collaboration with parents, teachers, professionals, ...</i>	24
<i>Communication</i>	<i>To communicate with children and adults with SEN ... // It is important to communicate with people with SEN // It is very difficult to communicate with persons who have special needs and persons taking care of them ...</i>	7
<i>Sharing experiences</i>	<i>To organise dissemination of good practice. // ... to share with good practices... // to pay more attention to dissemination of good practices. // ... to share with experiences.</i>	8

Source: own research.

According to Dingle et al. (2004), the implementation of collaborative and consultative relationships by co-planning and co-teaching, establishing and adhering to meetings, developing IEPs (insert full words for iep here) and sharing expertise was identified as essential for special teachers.

Although the respondents acknowledged that the collaboration competency is one of the most important, however, this ability was identified as one to be improved. Quite a large share of respondents stated that it was relevant for them to improve their abilities of *leadership; approaches of continuous learning, openness to change; value of inclusive education and reflectivity* (see Table 4).

Table 4. Needs of Improving Personal Abilities

Subcategory	Examples of statements	No. of statement
<i>Leadership</i>	<i>To assume a leadership role... to encourage colleagues to share ideas and good professional practices, motivate team members. //...it is relevant for me to encourage colleagues' sharing ideas and good practices, and motivate team members. // The ability to enter into activities that promote continuous improvement, search and have followers. ...</i>	6

Subcategory	Examples of statements	No. of statement
<i>Approaches of continuous learning, openness to changes</i>	<i>... to demonstrate innovation, ... // ... to gain knowledge for the sake of a happier SEN pupil who is not afraid to make mistakes, wants to dare and just wants to be himself/herself. // ... to continuously learn, attending various courses // ... continuous improvement ... // ... continuous learning and improvement. // Constantly learn about novelties ... // ... awareness and knowledge of novelties. // Understanding of permanent novelties, their application.</i>	15
<i>Values of inclusive education</i>	<i>... Respect and tolerance, openness to change, knowledge. // ... Respect and tolerance for others, empathy, continuous improvement. // ... Theoretical knowledge of the inclusive school. //...issues of understanding and development of inclusion.</i>	4
<i>Reflectivity abilities</i>	<i>I am going to defend a qualification category; therefore, I find it very important to self-evaluate my professional knowledge and abilities, professional development prospects.</i>	1

Source: own research.

The most relevant needs of improving professional competencies of respondents (special teachers) are: *psycho-pedagogical assessment; knowledge of psychology; individualisation of education; teachers' and parents' counselling, assistance to the teacher* (see Table 5).

Table 5. The Needs of Improving Special Educator's Specific Competencie

Subcategory	Examples of statements	No. of statement
<i>Psycho-pedagogical assessment</i>	<i>Psycho-pedagogical child assessment // Special teacher should be able to perform psycho-pedagogical child assessment, identify levels of special educational needs... // To be able to identify pupils' SEN.</i>	4
<i>Needs of knowledge of psychology</i>	<i>... To gain more knowledge for solving children's conflicts.// Slightly lack psychological knowledge. //... to understand the pupil's age groups ...// To gain knowledge how to work with gifted children.</i>	4
<i>Individualisation of education</i>	<i>To take into account children's possibilities and provide him / her with special educational support //... to be able to help them individually ... // to organise children's activities according to their interests and needs ... to apply various teaching methods ... /... to consider children's possibilities while individualising tasks and their quantity.</i>	10

Subcategory	Examples of statements	No. of statement
Teachers' and parents' counselling, support to the teacher	To deepen colleagues' counselling knowledge // Support to subject teachers preparing individual curricula for pupils. // ...Educative support provided to school community // Family counselling ...	10

Source: own research.

Part of the respondents stated that they found it important to continuously improve their competencies: *Improvement of all competencies is very important. // It is very important to constantly deepen my knowledge of different competencies (...). On one hand, the very child's education is very important and the biggest focus on pupils but it is a short-sighted approach. Only when I participate, interact, collaborate with colleagues, in the seminars, celebrations I feel that I am improving, I have a positive disposition, and my horizon is expanding.*

A factor analysis showed the most important components of the special teachers' competencies and respondents' most strongly possessed competencies (see Table 6).

Table 6. The Most Important Components of the Special Teacher's Professional Competencies and their Self-Assessments

Importance of professional competencies KMO = 0,738; <i>df</i> = 105; <i>p</i> = 0,000; α = 0,824	L	Self-assessment of professional competencies KMO = 0,899; <i>df</i> = 105; <i>p</i> = 0,000; α = 0,944	L
Special educational support to the pupil and support to the teacher (32.2%)		Support to the teacher and special educational support to the child (57.5%)	
<i>To prepare individual curricula for training / strengthening of cognitive abilities. Develop a training plan for individual cognitive abilities.</i>	0,867	<i>To help the teacher to understand the child's possibilities.</i>	0,954
<i>To prepare an individual education programme.</i>	0,820	<i>To provide individual special educational support in the classroom, considering children's possibilities and needs.</i>	0,949
<i>To modify the content of the curriculum.</i>	0,817	<i>To help the teacher to choose individual subject teaching methods and tasks appropriate for the child.</i>	0,893
<i>To support the teacher in developing a modified or an individual curriculum according to the child's possibilities and needs.</i>	0,756	<i>To choose subject teaching methods, tasks, considering the level of children's special educational needs.</i>	0,797

Importance of professional competencies KMO = 0,738; df = 105; p = 0,000; α = 0,824	L	Self-assessment of professional competencies KMO = 0,899; df = 105; p = 0,000; α = 0,944	L
<i>To help the teacher to choose individual subject teaching methods and tasks that are appropriate to the child.</i>	0,748	<i>To provide support to the teacher in developing a modified or an individual curriculum according to the child's possibilities and needs.</i>	0,792
<i>To help the teacher to be aware of the child's possibilities.</i>	0,602	<i>To prepare an individual education plan / programme.</i>	0,704
		<i>To identify children's developmental and special educational needs.</i>	0,658
		<i>To modify an educational curriculum.</i>	0,584
		<i>To develop an individual curricula for training of cognitive abilities.</i>	0,567
		<i>To perform a psycho-pedagogical assessment of a child.</i>	0,548
		<i>To identify the level of special educational needs of a child</i>	0,542
Basics of special pedagogical knowledge and practical abilities (11.4%)		Basics of special pedagogical knowledge (8.2%)	
<i>To perform psycho-pedagogical assessment of a child.</i>	0,755	<i>To analyse and critically evaluate processes and trends of Lithuanian and European education systems and changes in the field of special education.</i>	0,914
<i>Have knowledge in psycho-pedagogical assessment principles and criteria.</i>	0,737	<i>To be aware of educational innovations and new legal regulations of inclusive and special education.</i>	0,759
<i>To identify levels of special educational needs.</i>	0,673	<i>Have knowledge in psycho-pedagogical assessment principles and criteria.</i>	0,742
<i>Have knowledge of disabilities, disorders and learning difficulties.</i>	0,526	<i>Have knowledge of disabilities, disorders and learning difficulties.</i>	0,623

Source: own research.

The research has revealed the most important components of special teacher professional competencies as follows: 1) *special educational support to a child and a teacher*, 2) *special pedagogical knowledge and practical abilities*.

In other words, the professional knowledge and abilities include as follows: knowledge in psycho-pedagogical assessment principles and criteria and its application while performing a psycho-pedagogical assessment of a child, and identifying a level of special educational needs of a child, as well as knowledge of disabilities, disorders and learning difficulties. The aforementioned components are the latent factors that help special teachers to professionally perform their core functions, e.g., to prepare individual plans for strengthening the cognitive abilities of a child; to modify / develop an individual education programme; to provide special educational support to a child; to meet his / her special educational needs, and support the teacher to teach children.

The data on the most important components of special teachers general competencies, and the areas of the strongest general competencies according to the respondents' self-assessment can be seen in Table 7.

Table 7. The Most Important Components of Special Teacher General Competencies and their Self-Assessments

Importance of social and personal competencies KMO = 0,854; df = 45; p = 0,000; α = 0,903	L	Self-assessment of social and personal competencies KMO = 0,859; df = 45; p = 0,000; α = 0,899	L
Interaction, collaboration, leadership abilities (54.7%)		Value of inclusive education and lifelong learning (53.7%)	
<i>To organise the dissemination of good pedagogical practice, inter-institutional events and projects, to counsel colleagues on value matters of inclusive education.</i>	0,905	<i>To demonstrate respect and tolerance to individual differences: social, cultural, religious, and ethnic.</i>	0,904
<i>To communicate in the national and foreign languages, disseminate or interpret ideas, and facts of professional activities.</i>	0,888	<i>Have positive attitudes towards continuous learning, openness to change.</i>	0,849
<i>To be able to self-reflect on own professional activity, knowledge and skills, and plan own professional development.</i>	0,798	<i>To be able to communicate with children or adults with special / educational needs.</i>	0,745
<i>To assume a leadership role, demonstrate innovation, encourage colleagues to share ideas and good pedagogical practice, and motivate team members.</i>	0,756	<i>To be able to self-reflect on own professional activity, knowledge and skills, and plan own professional development.</i>	0,692
<i>To demonstrate respect and tolerance for individual differences: social, cultural, religious, and ethnic.</i>	0,630	<i>To be able to collaborate with institutions providing support to a child and a family.</i>	0,661

Importance of social and personal competencies KMO = 0,854; <i>df</i> = 45; p = 0,000; α = 0,903	L	Self-assessment of social and personal competencies KMO = 0,859; <i>df</i> = 45; p = 0,000; α = 0,899	L
<i>To cooperate with institutions providing support to a child and a family.</i>	0,513		
Constructive communication, collegiality and support abilities (9.6%)		Abilities of leadership, dissemination of professional experience and linguistic communication (11.1%)	
<i>To be able to communicate with children or adults with special / educational needs</i>	0,852	<i>To assume a leadership role, demonstrate innovation, encourage colleagues to share ideas and good pedagogical practice, and motivate team members.</i>	-0,959
<i>To constructively interact and collaborate with participants of education (pupils, their parents, teachers, and education support staff).</i>	0,576	<i>To organise the dissemination of good pedagogical practices, inter-institutional events and projects, to counsel colleagues on value matters of inclusive education.</i>	-0,791
<i>Have positive attitudes towards continuous learning, openness to change.</i>	0,547	<i>To communicate in the national and foreign languages, disseminate or interpret ideas, facts of professional activities.</i>	-0,768
<i>To provide support to colleagues solving children's interactive problems and conflicts, to improve the efficiency of communication in order to improve the microclimate in the classroom.</i>	0,516		

Source: own research.

The factor analysis showed that the main strength of the special teachers who took part in the research is *positive attitudes towards continuous learning, and openness to change*.

However, according to the self-assessment results, the negative weight values of the component *Abilities of leadership, dissemination of professional experience and linguistic communication (leadership, dissemination of professional experience and linguistic communication abilities)*, indicate that variables of this component negatively relate to the factor. Based on the data of the other measurements (see Tables 2–4), perhaps it can be stated that *leadership, professional experience dissemination and linguistic communication abilities* are less developed in comparison with other core competencies.

This research data can be interpreted as that in many schools the culture of collaboration is still insufficiently developed. The other researchers support our findings,

as “...the ability to collaborate with parents and colleagues is a requisite skill for the teaching workforce” (Darling-Hammond, 1997, qtd. in Fisher et al., 2003, p. 45). In the opinion of Fisher et al. (2003, p. 45), inclusive education “requires changes in skills, knowledge, and dispositions of all teachers”.

Conclusions

1. The research showed that the main components of the special teachers professional competence included special pedagogical knowledge and an ability to apply them whilst providing special educational support to a child and a teacher. Special teachers indicated that, according to their own pedagogical experiences, the identification of children’s developmental and special educational needs, choice of teaching methods and strategies, and the development of an individual education programme are amongst the most important professional competencies. Special teachers self-assessed the above abilities as good enough. However, they acknowledged that it is relevant to keep improving the abilities of psycho-pedagogical assessment, individualisation of education, teachers and parents counselling and providing support to the teacher.
2. General competencies such as interaction, collaboration, leadership and communication and inclusive education values and beliefs are an integral part of the special teachers professional competencies. The most important components of social competencies are the ability of interaction, collaboration, leadership and constructive communication, collegiality and support. Research showed, that the respondents assessed their own ability to communicate with persons who have special educational needs as well as their competencies of interaction and collaboration with children, their parents, teachers and support staff, and institutions providing support to the child and the family, as best developed. Although, the respondents acknowledged the importance of leadership competencies, they evaluated their own competencies of this area as the weakest ones. Acknowledging the competence of collaboration as one of the most important, research participants emphasised the need to improve their own competencies of collaboration and leadership.
3. The research demonstrated that special teachers self-assessed their specific professional competencies and the majority of general social and personal competencies as good enough. The strength of special teachers who took part in the research is knowledge of special education and the ability to provide support to the teacher and children, and to follow values of inclusive education and lifelong learning. Special teachers assessed their own competencies of leadership, professional experience dissemination and linguistic communication abilities poorly.
4. The research showed that for special teachers who work in inclusive schools, the professional development and continuous learning is of most importance. Special teachers should demonstrate openness to changes and innovations, be able to share their professional experiences, and should explicitly demonstrate the value of inclusive education. Therefore, critical thinking and reflectivity, understanding

of one's own possessed competencies and needs for improvement, and continuous learning are particularly important. It is obvious that there should be much more emphasis on development and improvement of special teachers collaboration and leadership abilities. The research data are valuable for developers and implementers of study programmes and in-service training programmes of special teachers.

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