

COMPETENCE DEVELOPMENT EXPERIENCES OF PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS IN THE CONTEXT OF INCLUSION

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ABSTRACT

The provision of quality inclusive education is the responsibility of all professionals at schools, particularly the teaching staff of primary education. The increasing diversity in the classroom requires all teachers to care for different pupils' learning needs, namely through the establishment of flexible, adaptable learning environments, including differentiation by using of a variety of teaching methods and learning materials in their classrooms. The most important factor influencing inclusive education is the professional preparation of teachers. Primary teachers must be prepared to care for all learners, regardless of their abilities or needs. This means that teachers need to acquire the competences needed to deliver inclusive education to all pupils. The aim of this study is to reveal the competence development experiences of primary education teachers in the context of inclusion. A qualitative research methodological approach was chosen for the study. 9 informants took part in the study. The analysis of primary school teachers' experiences revealed that the main motives for professional development are personal development and the pursuit of a higher qualification category. Areas of improvement identified by teachers working with inclusion in the future include improving digital competences, personalising education, and leadership in education. Participants shared their experiences and expressed problems with competence development activities that are related to the lack of practical knowledge and skills. The informants identified areas of relevance and requiring professional competence development in the context of inclusion: individual learning needs of children; working with pupils with severe learning difficulties; and the application of digital competences in modelling teaching and learning.

Keywords: *competence development, inclusion, inclusive education, primary education, teachers' experiences*

Introduction

Various international organizations involved in international education policy (UNESCO, United Nations, European Agency for the Development of Special Needs and Inclusive Education, etc.) describe inclusive education as an evolving process aimed

at ensuring quality education for all members of society, recognising and respecting diversity, taking into account the individual abilities and needs of each person, and avoiding discrimination of any kind. It is now recognised that the concept of inclusion should be applied not only to pupils with special educational needs, but also to other learners who may be vulnerable and discriminated against because of their differences. Lithuania, along with other democracies, is implementing the principles of inclusive education by moving from school-for-all to school-for-everyone. On 1 September 2024, amendments to the Law on Education, adopted by the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania in 2020, entered into force. These amendments are in line with global goals for inclusive education, including UNESCO's Education 2030 programme, the Sustainable Development Agenda, and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The 2018 TALIS (2020) survey showed that Lithuanian teachers had identified important aspects of inclusive education, working in classrooms with pupils of different abilities, teaching in multicultural and multilingual environments among the weakest areas of their professional preparation, and that about one third of teachers find adapting lessons for pupils with individual needs stressful. The development of teachers' competences and potential in the context of inclusive education therefore becomes a relevant area for competence development and the focus of this research. Teachers' competences in relation to inclusive education encompass a wide range of competences needed in inclusive classrooms, ranging from the ability to respond to the challenges posed by increasing socio-cultural diversity in the classroom to specific competences in adapting the curriculum to the individual learning needs of pupils.

The aim of this study is to reveal the experiences of competence development of primary education teachers in the context of inclusion. In order to uncover the problem and the goal, this study used a *qualitative research approach* to explore teachers' experiences of competency development in the context of inclusive education.

Theoretical part

Changing social, economic and cultural contexts, technological and digital advances, global trends, growing climate challenges and demographic trends are increasing society's need to continuously acquire new knowledge, skills, and competences. Education must empower everyone to be adaptable and to become leaders of change. Education embraces the challenge to provide inclusive and equal-quality education for all and to promote lifelong learning. Education is expected to play an important role in the creation of national wealth, promoting personal growth, societal maturity, innovation, and job creation (State Progress Strategy *Lithuania's Vision for the Future – Lithuania 2050*, 2023). The 2015 World Education Forum declared equality of opportunity, non-discrimination and inclusion as key challenges for the future of education (UNESCO, 2024). This future direction for education was further reinforced by the United Nations General Assembly resolution adopted in the same year, *Changing our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable*

Development (A/RES/70/1, 2015), which covers the social, economic and environmental spheres of life, from gender equality to quality education, responsible consumption and production, and the preservation of life on Earth. Miltenienė, Kaffemanienė, Melienė, Kairienė, Geležinienė & Tomėnienė (2020), discussing the vision of sustainable development, argue that the world of future can be described as one in which universal respect for human rights and human dignity, equality and non-discrimination are embedded. And equal opportunities, so that human potential can be fully realised and contribute to shared prosperity. It is a just, equitable, tolerant, open and socially inclusive world where the needs of the most vulnerable are met. The development of inclusive education requires the right educational policy, school perspective and methodological and organisational support for teachers (*Lithuania. Education in the country and regions. Inclusive education*, 2022).

Inclusion in education with changes in teachers' competences is discussed in the works of a number of researchers (Miltenienė et al., 2020; Auškelis et al., 2022; Rizalie & Basuki, 2022; Galkienė, Monkevičienė, 2023), pointing to the importance of teachers' competences. Other authors draw attention to the importance of cooperation between teachers and the wider school community (Wahyuningsih et al., 2020; Meier & Rossi, 2020; Galkiene, 2021; Braslauskienė & Ramanauskienė, 2023). According to Auškelis et al. (2022), the implementation of the principle of inclusion is discussed not only at national level but also at school level, emphasising the importance of personalised, individualised education and teaching, recognising that people have different experiences, needs and aspirations and learn at different paces and in different ways.

Miltenienė et al. (2020) point out that inclusive education is a continuous process of school change and improvement that never reaches a final level of perfection. Creating an inclusive environment is about ensuring that every child has access to quality education alongside their peers in the community closest to their home. This obliges schools to continuously monitor the quality of education and to improve their readiness to welcome all pupils, regardless of individual characteristics, barriers or difficulties, and to strive to ensure effective education. Milteniene et al. (2020), referring to Ainscow et al., identified three necessary conditions for quality inclusive education: inclusion, participation and achievement (see Figure 1).



Figure 1 Conditions for inclusive education (Miltenienė et al., 2020, p. 58)

Miltenienė et al. (2020), discussing the model for implementing change in schools, emphasise the importance of adhering to the following principles in order to bring about the change in practice:

- Ensuring responsible and shared leadership to build a culture, policy and practice of inclusive education at all levels and in all school settings: in the classroom, with parents, in informal activities, in staff meetings, etc.;
- Takes a holistic approach to people and education, where the aim is to get to know each pupil, identify their abilities and use them to unlock their personal potential, personalising education;
- Ensure the accessibility of information and physical environments;
- To create a learning environment where everyone feels safe, accepted, supported and encouraged to learn and express themselves;
- To differentiate, individualise and personalise education; to support each pupil according to their individual needs; to enable teachers to develop their competence in inclusive education and to learn from each other through collaboration and problem solving;
- Ensuring that the necessary resources are available and managed efficiently.

In practice, these principles and processes of inclusive education are stronger at the school level than at the level of individual teachers, as shown in the *Thematic external evaluation report on the implementation of inclusive education in schools implementing general education programmes* (2022). Schools often declare a culture and attitudes towards inclusive education, but these processes are not observed in everyday educational practice. Leadership and management are valued more than pedagogy and pupils' experiences. Schools are better at mobilising the community, collaborating and negotiating the direction of inclusive education, but these agreements are only partially implemented in the day-to-day organisation of inclusive education. According to Deniz & Ilik (2021), teachers are expected to be able to respond to the different needs of children in their classrooms and to support the development of children of all levels and needs. For this reason, teachers need to have professional knowledge and skills related to integration as well as subject knowledge. If teachers do not have the professional knowledge and skills related to inclusion, authors believe that negative attitudes towards pupils with inclusive needs can be observed. This situation also has a negative impact on the attitudes pupils of typical development towards inclusive pupils (Deniz et al., 2021). In practical educational activities related to inclusion processes, teachers should perform many tasks, for example, to know the principles of inclusive education, to be able to apply them to included pupils, to recognise the cognitive, emotional and physical characteristics of persons with special needs, as well as to determine the needs of persons with special needs, to develop individual educational programmes, to apply them, etc. As Makhambetova & Magauova (2023) argue, in order to adequately and timely prepare teachers to deliver inclusive education, education systems should commit to mentoring new teachers and ensuring continuous and appropriate professional development. There should also be a concerted and systematic effort by universities and education systems to ensure

a coherent transition from teacher training to competent and effectively trained inclusive educators. Makhambetova & Magauova (2023) state that in order to adequately and timely prepare teachers to deliver inclusive education, education systems should commit to mentoring new teachers and ensuring continuous and appropriate professional development. Moreover, universities and education systems should make joint and systematic efforts to ensure a coherent transition from teacher training to competent and effectively trained inclusive education teachers.

The teacher could contribute to an inclusive culture at school in a number of ways, for example: the teacher contributes to the success of all pupils; the teacher creates a supportive and inclusive learning environment where pupils are valued as integral members of the classroom community and where positive collaboration is paramount; the teacher takes responsibility for ensuring that the classroom meets the needs of all pupils; the teacher creates an effective learning environment; the teacher contributes to pupils' learning needs through innovative teaching and learning strategies (Somma, Bennett Brock, 2020; Bolat, Kiyak, 2024). To fulfil this role, the teacher needs to have good intentions and knowledge of the teaching practices that promote inclusive education by integrating inclusive practices into classroom activities. In inclusive education, the teacher's role is not limited to day-to-day activities, as he or she can contribute to educational innovation through the development of new pedagogical strategies and action research, as well as through the identification of resources to support inclusive education. Włodarczyk, Somma, Bennett, Gallagher (2015) note that inclusive educators play a key role in meeting the expectations and needs of learners through a wide range of innovative teaching and learning strategies. In this context, teacher development, learning and competence development activities can be identified as actions.

Juškevičienė, Jevsikova, Stupurienė & Vinikienė (2024) show that teachers' personal and psychological factors, as well as their perceptions of working conditions at school, can have a significant impact on their motivation to engage in professional learning activities. These authors identify seven categories of teachers' motivation for learning: (1) to influence pupils and their learning; (2) to learn with and/or from other teachers; (3) to become a *better* teacher; (4) to meet professional competence requirements; (5) to continuously strive to learn and engage in learning as a *habit*; (6) to gain knowledge on topics of interest to teachers; and (7) to continue learning given the means, time and resources. Rizalie & Basuki (2022) point out common problems in teacher development activities where teachers have not yet assimilated scientific and technological advances. There are still many teachers who just follow the curriculum, and teachers lack creativity to innovate in learning activities, learning methods and strategies, teaching materials and new models of learning relationships that are in line with the contemporary features of inclusive education. According to the above-mentioned authors, teachers' performance is still sub-optimal, inclusive education practices are still in their infancy, but the results of teachers' performance are felt by pupils and parents, and teachers are always required to improve their performance in order to achieve a better educational process.

Methodology

A qualitative research method was chosen to explore the experiences of primary school teachers about the possibilities of competence development (Creswell, 2014; Žydzūnaitė, Sabaliauskas, 2017). The research was based on the concept of inclusion as highlighted by Booth, Ainscow (2002), Soriano, Watkins, Ebersold (2017), which emphasises that teachers' preparation for inclusive education is related to personal and professional aspects and the conditions created by the educational institution to prepare for this process. These provisions were adapted to provide an interpretative, holistic view of the situation under analysis. The semi-structured interview method was chosen to answer the question of what are the competence development experiences of primary teachers' in the context of inclusion. In planning the research questions, three themes were identified: 1) motives for professional development; 2) areas of teacher development in the context of inclusion; 3) challenges in competence development activities.

The survey was conducted in June 2024. A purposive, criterion-based sample of participants was used. The main criterion was primary school teachers.

Participants of the study. 9 primary school teachers of Klaipėda city agreed to participate in the study. Demographic characteristics of the participants: all the participants were women, with an average age of 53 years and an average teaching experience of 28 years. Of these, six were teachers methodologists and two were expert teachers.

Qualitative content analysis was used to process the data. The main purpose of qualitative content analysis is to reveal the main aspects of the phenomenon under study (Žydzūnaitė, Tauginienė, 2017). Content analysis enables qualitative and reasonable conclusions to be drawn after an objective and systematic analysis of the textual features (Kardelis, 2016). In this study, a three-stage data analysis sequence was used: 1) reading the transcripts and annotating the notes; 2) initial coding of the data, which involved generating categories without limiting the number of categories; and 3) combining the categories extracted in the second stage, noting recurring ideas and themes that emerged in different groups (Nyumba, et al., 2018).

Study validity and reliability. In order to ensure the validity of the study, an environment of trust was created between the researcher and the study participants. It was made clear to the participants that the information they provided was confidential (informants were coded with an alphanumeric code, e.g., P1, P2, P3, etc.). It was also ensured that clear and understandable questions were asked during the interviews.

Research ethics refers to the moral principles that should guide the conduct of research, both in the preparation of the research and until the results are published. According to researchers (Žydzūnaitė, Sabaliauskas, 2017), ethical behaviour of the researcher makes the research results of higher quality. In this study, the principles of respect for personal privacy, confidentiality, anonymity and fairness were applied.

Results

A qualitative content analysis method was used to analyse the responses, using open-ended questions to elicit informants’ experiences. Professional development for primary school teachers is a prerequisite for quality education, better pupil outcomes and an inclusive learning environment. An analysis of informants’ responses to the first question about their motives for professional development led to the identification of the subcategories (see Table 1).

The survey findings reveal the main motives of the informants for upgrading their qualifications, which can be divided into two main groups: 1) internal – to improve personal professional competences (*“It’s important for me to improve”; “I want to improve”*), and 2) external – to obtain a higher qualification (*“I’m improving my skills because I’m going to take part in an attestation”; “I want to improve”; “It is relevant for my career”*). The results of the study showed that primary school teachers also perceive their profession as constantly changing, requiring constant adaptation to the ongoing changes in education, and that professional development is a prerequisite for maintaining a quality educational process. This is illustrated by the responses of the informants: *“To respond to change and innovation”, “To strive for quality teaching”*. While professional development for primary teachers should be related to improving the educational process, the findings of the study show that material incentives and career aspirations are also important. One informant indicated that the possibility of higher pay was their main motivation, while a significant number of participants in the study indicated that they were aiming for a higher level of qualification. This suggests that while extrinsic motives are often not the main motivator, they are still an important incentive, particularly when it comes to meeting teachers’ needs for continuing professional development. One informant’s response suggests that professional development is an individual process related to personal goals and values: *“The decision to upgrade is personal and depends on individual needs and goals”*. This response suggests that primary teachers are driven by intrinsic motivation, stemming

Table 1 Teachers’ motives for professional development

Category	Subcategory	Supporting statements
Motivations for upgrading qualifications	Personal competence development	“... it’s important for me to improve ...” (P3); “I seek personal development ...” (P7); “Continuous improvement is essential for me as a person ...” (P1), “The decision to upgrade my qualifications is personal and depends on my individual needs and goals” (P8).
	Pursuing a higher qualification	“... I’m improving my skills because I’m going to take part in an attestation ...” (P5); “I want a higher qualification” (P6); “It is relevant for my career” (P9); “It is important for me to upgrade my qualifications” (P2).
	Striving for quality education	“Responding to change and innovation ...” (P2), “... strive for quality teaching” (P1).
	The extrinsic incentive motive	“Motivated by higher pay” (P4).

from an internal desire to improve, rather than external incentives or qualification requirements. Thus, it can be said that primary teachers' motives for professional development are diverse, both internal (improving personal competence, striving for quality of education) and external (career, remuneration). This diversity shows that primary teachers' motivation cannot be understood in a one-sided way: it is shaped by the context of educational change as well as by teachers' individual goals, values and experiences.

The following sub-categories were identified in the analysis on participants' responses to the question which areas of professional development contribute to the implementation of inclusive education (see Table 2).

The analysis of the training experiences of primary school teachers revealed that the informants were seeking to improve their qualifications in the field of inclusive education. Informants highlighted the practical applicability of digital, personalisation and leadership skills in their daily work. The findings show that digital technologies can help to plan and deliver lessons, adapt content for pupils of different abilities, create personalised learning content and practical tasks. This is illustrated by their responses: *"... I create digital content", "ICT is important to make lessons interesting and engaging"*. The use of digital tools allows more flexibility in the organisation of the teaching/learning process. The informants stated that they would like to learn how to use virtual platforms, video tools, interactive tasks and games in their teaching. This is illustrated by one of the responses of the study participants: *"... using digital tools in teaching: apps, interactive platforms, video material, artificial intelligence and games would help me to meet different needs of pupils"*.

Table 2 Areas of professional development identified by informants as contributing to inclusion

Category	Subcategory	Supporting statements
Areas of professional development	Digital competences	"It is important to develop my ICT skills ... using digital tools in my teaching: apps, interactive platforms, videos, artificial intelligence, games, to help me meet different needs of my pupils" (P4); "... creating digital content" (P9); "ICT is important to make lessons interesting and engaging ..." (P2).
	Personalisation of education	"I would like to gain knowledge about adapting teaching materials to pupils' abilities" (P1); "To help me adapt education to pupils with different abilities" (P7); "... to gain knowledge about personalising the learning content to help pupils overcome barriers to learning." (P6).
	Leadership	"I would like to know more about teacher leadership, collaboration skills" (P3); "I need to be a leader and inspire pupils, promote pupil's leadership" (P5); "... to develop self-confidence, ... to be a leader. ... to share best practices, to be a leader in a team" (P8); "The leadership skills I will acquire will help me motivate others ... will give pupils more responsibility, make them more active, more respectful of each other, which will increase cooperation in the classroom and reduce bullying" (P2).

This shows that in order to improve digital literacy, informants strive to create an inclusive learning environment for every pupil.

Individualisation is one of the main strategies for implementing inclusive education. Informants state that they need to “... *acquire knowledge on how to adapt teaching materials to pupils’ abilities*”; “... *adapt education to pupils with different abilities*”, “... *so that pupils can overcome learning barriers more easily*”. This shows that the informants understand that inclusive education and individualisation are closely related, respond to the needs of each pupil and create conditions for successful learning, therefore they emphasised the need to improve the competences of individualisation.

The analysis of the research findings shows that the informants perceive improving leadership skills as an important part of implementing inclusion. The research participants emphasised the need to acquire knowledge and skills to initiate change, to share experiences and to work in teams. This is illustrated by the informants’ responses: “*I would like to know more about the teacher leadership, collaboration skills*”; “... *to be a leader and inspire pupils*”; “... *to develop self-confidence, to share good practice, leadership in a team*”. The informants also emphasise that the acquired knowledge and skills of leadership will help to “... *promote pupil’s leadership* ...”, “... *give pupils more responsibility, they will be more active, they will respect each other more, which will strengthen cooperation in the classroom and reduce bullying*”. This shows that improving leadership skills helps informants to create an open, inclusive and collaborative learning culture, to initiate change and to share good practice. Thus, it can be argued that improving the skills of digital technologies, personalised education and leadership will help primary school teachers to address inclusion challenges more effectively: to develop personalised learning content, to use innovative digital learning strategies and to create an enabling learning environment for all pupils, taking into account their individual abilities and needs.

The participants of the study shared their experiences and expressed the emerging problems in implementing inclusion in competence development events. The following subcategories were identified in the responses of the analysed informants (see Table 3).

The analysis of the research results shows that one of the most important problems that primary school teachers experience when attending professional development events is insufficient transfer of knowledge and skills necessary to meet the challenges of inclusion. The participants in the study stated that they lacked “... *more ... practical seminars*”; “... *practical advice and methods in the education of pupils with special needs*”; “... *practical application of educational programmes*”; “... *more practical knowledge about the possibilities of recognising different needs*”. These responses show that professional development events are dominated by theoretical content which does not meet the needs of teachers’ practical work. Consequently, one of the main obstacles to the implementation of inclusion is insufficient orientation of professional development events for primary school teachers to real, practical pedagogical situations.

For the successful implementation of inclusion, primary school teachers need not only to know which learning methods are required to create an inclusive environment, but also to be able to apply these methods in the teaching/learning process. This is evidenced

Table 3 Problems related to implementing inclusion in skills development events

Category	Subcategory	Supporting statements
Problems related to implementing inclusion in skills development events	Lacking practical knowledge and skills	"... more practical seminars would be needed" (P8); "... practical advice and methods for educating pupils with intellectual disabilities" (P4); "How to apply educational programmes practically" (P2); "... I would like to have more practical knowledge about the possibilities of recognising different needs" (P9).
	Lacking diversity in teaching/learning methods	"How to use different teaching strategies to make lessons inclusive" (P5); "The variety of methods used in modern schools with specific examples" (P2); "... methods for working effectively with support professionals" (P4).
	Difficulties in applying the principles of integration	"... what is most lacking is help and prepared tools, learning materials on how to work with pupils with special needs" (P1); "Practical seminars with solutions to specific inclusion problems" (P7); "... presented in a very abstract way, lacking specificity" (P6); "We listen to a seminar on inclusion, but when we have to write an adapted task for a child with special needs – I don't know where to start" (P9).

by the responses of the informants: *"The variety of methods used in modern schools with specific examples"*, *"How to implement different teaching strategies to make lessons inclusive"*, *"... methods for effective cooperation with support specialist"*. This leads us to believe that it is important that in-service training not only presents the methods recommended for inclusion, but also their practical applicability in order to help teachers to integrate these methods effectively into the teaching/learning process.

The lack of practical knowledge was revealed in the training sessions analysing the implementation of inclusion principles in the teaching/learning process. The study participants indicated that they lacked specific tools, an analysis of real teaching/learning situations and methods to solve them in the trainings related to the implementation of inclusion. This is illustrated by the responses of the informants: *"... above all, there is a lack of help and prepared tools, learning materials on how to work with pupils with special needs"*; *"practical seminars with solutions to specific inclusion problems"*, which confirm that relevant problems are not properly examined in the trainings. This shows that the trainings do not pay enough attention to practical cases of inclusion and methods of analysing possible solutions in the real teaching/learning process. Thus, we can state that the challenges of implementing inclusion that primary school teachers face in the teaching/learning process are related to the delivery of the teaching/learning content of professional development events, which must not be overloaded with theoretical knowledge, but rather include more practical knowledge and skills.

During the study, informants were asked to identify the areas of professional development that were relevant and necessary to them in the context of inclusion. After summarising informants' responses to this question, the identified subcategories were the following (see Table 4).

Table 4 Areas of professional development mentioned by informants when implementing inclusive education

Category	Subcategory	Supporting statements
Professional development areas	Pupils' individual learning needs	"... the competence to identify and assess the individual needs of pupils..." (P8); "... how to successfully involve pupils with special needs in the educational process" (P3); "... how to meet the learning needs of each pupil" (P1); "... how to plan lessons so that all pupils are involved and motivated" (P5).
	Working with pupils with severe learning difficulties	"How to work with pupils with severe learning difficulties" (P4); "I don't think I have enough competences to work with pupils with severe learning difficulties" (P9); "How to apply different teaching methods to children with ASD" (P7); "There is a lack of tools to work with pupils with behavioural and emotional difficulties" (P6); "Help is needed to work in a classroom where there are several children with different needs" (P1).
	Applying digital competencies in modelling learning	"... how to differentiate the use of digital tools in the classroom according to the individual needs of pupils, their specificities..." (P5); "There is a lack of knowledge on how to integrate digital tools into teaching, creating attractive and effective educational content for pupils" (P2); "How to involve less motivated pupils in learning through digital tools" (P8)

The analysis of the research findings revealed the main areas of professional development identified by the informants as essential for the successful implementation of the principles of inclusive education. These areas are: individual learning needs of pupils; working with pupils with significant learning difficulties; applying digital literacy in modelling teaching/learning. They are supported by the research participants' statements, which reveal the targeted need for teachers' professional development.

Informants emphasised that the ability to identify and assess the learning needs of individual pupils is essential for the successful application of the principles of inclusive education in the classroom. Participants in the study stated that it was very important to develop "... the competence to identify and assess the needs of individual pupils ..."; to acquire knowledge and skills "... how to successfully include pupils with special educational needs in the educational process", "... how to respond to the learning needs of each pupil"; "... how to plan lessons so that all pupils are involved and motivated". These informants' responses show the desire of primary school teachers to improve competences that would help them to recognise the diversity of learners and to adapt the teaching/learning process according to their needs. Another important area – working with pupils with severe learning difficulties – reveals the lack of knowledge and practical skills of the research participants in this area. This is illustrated by the statements of the informants. They seek to acquire the competencies of "... how to work with pupils with severe learning difficulties" They seek to acquire the competencies of "... how to work with pupils with severe learning difficulties" and they admit that they have not acquired such competences by stating that

“... I do not have sufficient competencies to work with pupils with severe learning difficulties”. The informants also revealed the need to receive methodological recommendations and practical examples on *“How to apply various teaching methods to children with ASD”*; *“There is a lack of tools for working with pupils with behavioural and emotional difficulties”*; *“Help is needed on how to work in a classroom where there are several children with different needs”*. This shows the real need for professional development of primary school teachers to deepen their knowledge in the areas of support strategies, differentiation and individualisation of education. The third area identified by the informants – the use of digital competences in modelling teaching/learning – reveals the lack of knowledge and practical skills of teachers in using modern digital tools for inclusive education. According to the informants, they lack the competences of *“... how to differentiate the use of digital tools in the classroom according to the individual needs of the pupils...”*; *“... how to integrate digital tools in the classroom and create attractive and effective educational content for pupils with special needs”*; *“... how to use digital tools to involve pupils who are less motivated to learn”*. These statements indicate that digital literacy has not yet been fully mastered by primary school teachers in creating flexible and inclusive teaching/learning environments for all pupils. In conclusion, the research data revealed the need for primary school teachers to continuously improve their professional competences in relation to inclusive education practice, especially in identifying individual pupils’ learning needs, methods of working with pupils with learning difficulties and the use of digital tools in differentiated and individualised education.

Discussion and Conclusions

The development of teachers’ competences is an ongoing and relevant issue in the context of the implementation of inclusive education. It determines the scope and quality of inclusive education. It is important that teachers have a positive attitude towards the development of their professional competences, as this is the only way to ensure the inclusion of each pupil in learning at the appropriate level and to ensure the individual success of each pupil.

Miltenienė et al. (2020), when discussing a model for implementing change in schools, stress the importance of providing opportunities for primary school teachers to develop their professional competences. According to Makhambetova & Magauova (2023), it is important to ensure continuous and adequate professional development in order to prepare teachers to provide inclusive education in a timely and appropriate manner. The experience of the participants in this study showed that professional development is very important to them and the primary school teachers in the study are quite active in competence development activities. The findings of the study showed that the motives for upgrading are both intrinsic and extrinsic. The informants’ motives for upgrading their competences are personal growth and the enhancement of their professional competences. External motives such as career opportunities, certification, rewards for work are also important. This shows that the professional development of primary school

teachers is a complex phenomenon, determined by both the educational context and individual needs.

Primary teachers identified the development of digital, personalisation and leadership skills as important for implementing inclusion in the teaching/learning process. The study showed that these areas are key to creating an inclusive teaching/learning process. The informants aim to develop competences in the use of digital tools, personalised content for learners of different abilities and the leadership skills needed to initiate change and foster collaboration. S. Deniz & S. S. İlik (2021) emphasise that in teachers' professional activities related to inclusion processes, it is relevant for teachers to know the principles of inclusive education, to be able to apply them to inclusive students, to recognise the cognitive, emotional and physical qualities of individual children with disabilities, to identify the needs of these students, to develop an individualised curriculum and to use modern information and interactive tools.

In order to create effective and inclusive learning environments that meet the individual learning needs of students, it is important for the teacher to have not only theoretical but also practical knowledge (Somma & Bennett Brock, 2020; Bolat & Kiyak, 2024). Research shows that the main challenges faced by primary teachers in inclusive education contexts are related to a lack of practical knowledge and skills. The theoretical content of the prevailing in-service training events often does not meet the actual pedagogical needs of the informants. Participants in the study lacked concrete methods, tools and case studies to help them work with pupils with different needs. The content of professional development, according to participants, is required to be based on the principles of inclusive education and respond to the diversity of learners. Participants highlighted the need to improve their knowledge and practical skills in identifying the needs of individual pupils, differentiating and individualising work with pupils with severe learning difficulties, and modelling teaching and learning using digital tools. This suggests that the successful integration of inclusive education requires the continuous development of professional competences based on practice and focused on engaging and motivating pupils.

Primary teachers working in inclusive education settings play a key role in meeting the expectations and needs of learners through a wide range of innovative teaching and learning strategies. In this context, teacher development, learning and capacity building activities can be described as the actual (Włodarczyk et al., 2015). The findings of the study revealed that the success of teachers' professional development depends on responding to teachers' needs and providing targeted support in the context of educational change. Informants see themselves as active agents of change in the teaching/learning process in the context of inclusive education. However, primary teachers need targeted, coherent and practice-oriented support to develop competences in line with the principles of inclusive education and to create a high quality, flexible and inclusive learning environment for each pupil.

The limitation of qualitative research is related to the inevitable subjectivity of qualitative research. Although the following research has been planned and carried out in accordance with the requirements for this type of research, the generalisability of

the findings and the possibilities for their application are partly limited by the small number of research participants. It is the results of qualitative research that are unique and specific to the individuals involved in the research. Whilst it would be incorrect to generalise the findings of the study to all primary teachers, it is likely that the views expressed by the participants in this study provide an insight into the challenges and opportunities teachers face in relation to teacher professional development. The findings of the study suggest the need for further research into this phenomenon, involving general education teachers, educational support professionals, administrators and quantitative research.

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