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## Support for students with special educational needs in the Slovenian education system\*\*

### Summary

The article outlines how support is provided to students with special educational needs in the Slovenian education system. The principles of the adopted forms of assistance and the five tiers of the intervention model are discussed: 1. Support from teachers in the classroom, including lesson-related activities and other forms (additional teacher assistance), 2. Additional support from the school self-government, 3. Individual and group additional support, 4. Support from external institutions, 5. The process of issuing opinions regarding programs for students with special educational needs and individualized programs. The first tier involves additional teacher support, aimed at adapting the teaching process to the individual needs of students. The second tier consists of additional initiatives and measures within the student government. The third tier encompasses an individualized approach, taking into account the unique requirements of each student. The fourth tier provides support from external institutions specializing in assistance for students with disorders and disabilities. The fifth tier involves the process of issuing decisions and developing an individualized support program. The principles of supporting students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in the Slovenian education system are drawn from the Response to Intervention (RTI) model, widely recognized and applied in the USA for over 30 years. Currently, many teachers, researchers, and other specialists are examining its utility. The text includes an analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of the adopted support model and several conclusions relevant to the Polish context of education for students with special educational needs.

**Keywords:** Republic of Slovenia, inclusive education in Slovenia, RTI model, special educational needs (SEN), education support module

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## **Background of an inclusive education system in the Republic of Slovenia**

The global changes in Slovenia after the 1990s, particularly the establishment of an independent state, also necessitated comprehensive changes in the education system. A plan for comprehensive education system reform was formulated in 1995 as the White Paper on Education in the Republic of Slovenia. The 1995 White Paper was based on human rights and children's rights standards, as well as the rule of law, and it defined the fundamental principles, rules, and goals of education in Slovenia. The basic principle of equal opportunities regarding academic outcomes was to be reflected in the consideration of differences among children and their rights to choice and diversity. In 2000, a law was introduced regarding the placement of children with special needs in mainstream schools. This was the first law to incorporate the education of children with special educational needs into educational legislation (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2023).

Under Slovenian law, students with special educational needs include those with intellectual disabilities, blind and visually impaired individuals, children with visual impairments, deaf and hard of hearing individuals, students with speech and language disorders, students with physical disabilities, chronically ill students, students with learning difficulties, students with autistic disorders, and students with emotional and behavioral disorders who require adapted educational programs with additional professional support or tailored educational programs or special educational programs (Zakon o usmerjanju otrok s posebnimi potrebami, 2013).

Students are recognized as having special educational needs upon receiving an official decision from the National Institute of Education of Slovenia (NEIS). Typically, it is the parents who apply for the official placement procedures for students with special educational needs, but schools or students themselves (from the age of 15) can also apply. Students with special educational needs are inclusively placed in educational programs tailored to their physical, cognitive, emotional, social, and health needs. This process takes into account the child's level of development, ability to learn and achieve knowledge standards, as well as forecasts regarding their further development, considering any deficiencies, impairments, or disorders, and criteria determining the nature and degree of these deficiencies, impairments, or disorders. Providing education to students with special educational needs is a public service. Under exceptional circumstances, it may take place in private facilities without a concession or in private facilities, as well as in the form of home education (Eurydice).

## **The assumptions of the American RTI model in the Slovenian education system**

The basis for creating the Slovenian support model was the Response to Intervention (RTI) model existing in the United States for nearly 30 years. RTI is a multi-tiered approach to early identification and support of students with learning and behavioral needs (National Association of State Directors of Special Education & Council of Administrators of Special Education, 2006). The RTI process begins with high-quality instruction and universal screening of all children in general education classrooms. Students with difficulties receive interventions at increasingly higher tiers of intensity to accelerate their learning progress. Typically, the RTI model consists of three levels of instructional processes. At Tier 1, considered a key component of multi-tiered instruction, all students receive instruction within an evidence-based, scientifically researched core program.

All children receive instruction at Tier 1, but those requiring additional intervention receive supplemental instruction at Tiers 2 or 3. Tier 2 includes children who achieve below expected performance tiers (referred to as benchmark tiers) and are at risk of academic failure but still remain above tiers considered indicative of high-risk failure. Typically, depending on the RTI model used, small support groups at Tier 2 consist of approximately five to eight children. Tier 3 encompasses children considered at high risk of failure and, if they do not respond to interventions at Tier 2, are identified as having special educational needs. Student groups at Tier 3 are smaller, ranging from three to five children, and some models utilize individualized instruction (Sugai & Horner, 2009; Wheeler & Richey, 2019).

### **Five-tier support model in the Slovenian education system**

In 2007, the Expert Council for General Education of the Republic of Slovenia adopted a document titled “Učne težave v osnovni šoli: koncept dela” (Learning Difficulties in Primary School: Work Concept), which outlined guidelines for dealing with students experiencing learning difficulties. Within this document, strategies for implementing the RTI model were developed, along with key guidelines for its implementation (Križnar, 2018; Magajna et al., 2008). The experts opted for a five-tier model of assistance and support, based on the three-tiered American model. The project was adapted to Slovenian school practices and existing solutions and resources within the system. The tiers involve forms of support of varying intensity, starting with assistance provided by the teacher in the classroom. Subsequently, school counseling services or mobile special educators are engaged, employing individual and group forms of assistance, as well as utilizing support from external

specialized institutions. The process culminates in support for the most challenging cases, focusing on an educational program with non-standard implementation and additional professional assistance (Peklaj, 2016).

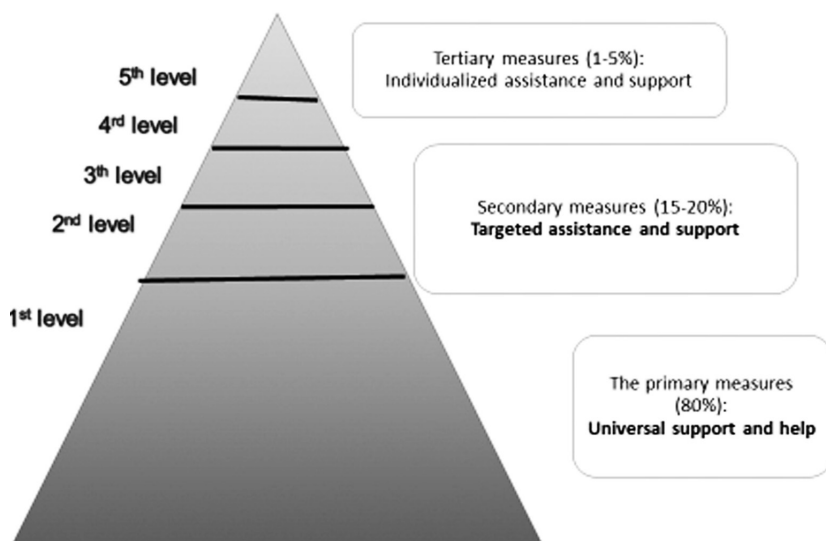


Figure 1. Five-tier model of help and support (source: Kavkler, 2011).

### The role of the teacher in the five-tier assistance and support model

The effectiveness of the model highlights the significant role of teachers and other school staff, as they are key to the quality implementation of the model. Professionals (psychologists, educators, special educators) determine which students require specific types of assistance and at what intensity. It is important for teachers to propose more intensive forms of assistance only after ensuring that the overall educational process for a particular student with learning difficulties is ineffective. This allows professionals to more effectively monitor the student's progress even at the tier of implementing simpler forms of assistance that students receive as part of regular teaching (Kavkler, 2011; Magajna, Kavkler, & Košir, 2011).

The teacher's assistance at the first tier is continuous and lasts throughout the support process. The first step conditioning the initiation of actions at the first tier of the model is careful observation of the student by the teacher in various classroom and non-classroom situations and activities. The teacher should record their observations and seek the reasons for what hinders the student in class,

how they react to stimuli, etc. Only based on appropriately collected information about the student can the teacher compare the student's work style with the usual learning method typical for a specific age group of students. The model aims for assistance at the first tier to be sufficient for as many students with learning difficulties as possible.

Assistance at the second and subsequent tiers does not need to be cumulatively related, which means that if a mobile special educator is involved in the third tier of assistance, it is not necessary to simultaneously continue consultation assistance at the second tier. Regardless of the increasing amount of assistance for the student with each subsequent tier and the growing circle of experts, the teacher spends the most time in contact with the student during regular classes. Therefore, their role is crucial at all stages of the model, and the teacher should not be excluded from the assistance project at any stage (Peklaj, 2016).

Support provided at the basic stage of assistance and all stages of the model are documented in the form of a journal, allowing insight into the student's progress and development for all participants in the assistance project. The role of parents of students with learning difficulties is emphasized early in the process and then at all other tiers of the model (Magajna et al., 2008). The intensity of therapy is influenced by: the time the teacher dedicates to the student, the frequency of therapy (number of hours of assistance per week), and the duration of therapy (number of minutes or hours of additional therapy per week). The intensity of assistance for students increases when support is provided in smaller groups. Therefore, groups of 2 to 6 people are most commonly formed.

### **Strategies to support students with special educational needs**

As part of specific strategies to support students with learning difficulties, experts point to the following approaches: cooperative teaching, cooperative learning, team problem-solving, and creating heterogeneous groups among team members, i.e., between the teacher who instructs the student and other school staff inside and outside the school. The school provides teachers with support focused on the teacher (provided by consultants, mobile special educators, and other specialists), focused on the student (provided by other teachers, consultants, mobile special educators, and other specialists), targeting both the teacher and student, and oriented towards collaboration and counseling, which is intended for all participants, i.e., teachers, students, and parents (Kavkler, 2008).

## **Educational adjustments**

Strategies to assist students with learning difficulties involve individualization and differentiation based on the difficulty of the subject matter or the child's special needs. The teacher individually selects and tailors requirements for each student. Adaptations are a normal part of teaching practice for all students in the classroom and vary from minimal to very explicit depending on the educational needs of the students. During lessons, the teacher can adjust: content by selecting different types of tasks based on their difficulty tier, ranging from specific to complex and abstract, and dividing tasks into multiple parts of varying difficulty tiers, while posing questions at different tiers of difficulty; process aimed at developing teaching strategies that enable students to most effectively grasp the content; assessment of learning outcomes, which must be adapted to the student's educational problems and needs (e.g., reading, attention, number automatization, coordination issues, etc.). To most effectively individualize and differentiate the teaching process, the teacher must identify the student's strengths (Kavkler, 2008).

### **Discovering and recognizing student's strengths**

Recognizing and discovering a student's strengths enables the development of strategies that will help them overcome learning difficulties in subsequent support processes. The teacher identifies the student's strengths, talents, and abilities. These aspects indicate how the student can effectively learn. This supports building the student's self-confidence, influences a positive self-image, and fosters the creation of a stimulating and safe environment in which the student develops social skills and others. Strengths can manifest in various areas of the student's activities, achievements, talents, and interests. Areas of student functioning to consider were described in an expert document from 2007 and include general and specific cognitive abilities, metacognitive abilities and functioning language; motivation to learn; emotional functioning; social integration and functioning; biological factors, physical functioning, and health; as well as home and school environment (Magajna et al., 2008).

### **Organizing the teaching process**

Systematically monitoring students' progress allows for adjusting the teaching process to individual needs, which facilitates effective knowledge acquisition. A key element of the structure is the ability to convey fundamental concepts in a way tailored to students' understanding, facilitating effective knowledge

acquisition. Effective feedback, both in real-time and from students, enables quick identification of errors or misunderstandings, fostering further refinement of the teaching process. Precise instructions facilitate understanding of expectations and task execution, positively impacting the efficiency of the learning process. Breaking down complex problems into smaller units helps focus on specific learning aspects, facilitating step-by-step knowledge acquisition. A comprehensive approach involves using various forms of learning support, such as materials, verbal, and non-verbal assistance. Teaching diverse learning strategies enables students to develop effective methods of knowledge acquisition. Regular skills training and diverse methods of knowledge retention help students retain acquired knowledge over a longer period. Combining these elements within the structure of teaching and learning constitutes, for the creators of the Slovenian education system, a comprehensive approach to education, shaping an effective teaching environment conducive to students' comprehensive development (Kavkler, 2008).

### **Individualization and differentiation of lessons by teachers**

Teachers individualize and differentiate lessons because there are differences among students in terms of knowledge, abilities, physical characteristics, backgrounds, motivation, readiness to work, social relationships, and health status. The rationale for professional reflection on the application of lesson individualization and differentiation lies primarily in how to recognize individual differences among students and incorporate them using appropriate organizational and implementation methods; how to achieve the highest quality and durability of students' knowledge; what the social and economic-educational needs are; how the democratic position of individuals in society is changing, and how to influence the socially shaped role of schools (Valenčič Zuljan, 2012).

Individualization of learning is understood by Slovenian researchers as discovering and developing well-founded individual differences among students. It is necessary to personalize the teaching and learning process as much as possible, i.e., to adapt to individual personal characteristics, needs, wishes, and inclinations of individual students, and to enable them as much independence in learning as possible. Differentiation of learning involves organizational actions, which include the method of learning and other differences only within smaller homogeneous or heterogeneous groups of learners (e.g., group work, supplementary and additional task work). The aim of differentiation is for the school, through more tailored learning objectives, content, and teaching methods, to better achieve social and individual educational goals. A characteristic feature is that all students in a given group are subject to relatively the same learning requirements and procedures (Strmčnik, 1993).

In Slovenia, three types of learning differentiation and individualization are indicated. The first is internal differentiation and individualization, which are maintained by naturally heterogeneous classes. Within the group, students' needs and capabilities are taken into account through the selection of different learning objectives (it is not necessary for all students to have the same objective), teaching content, and, above all, teaching methods and aids. To implement internal differentiation and individualization, three different models are used, namely the preference model, which overcomes students' difficulties by selecting more suitable and effective methodological procedures and longer learning times; the compensatory model, in which we choose different content if we find that a child cannot do something, and the corrective model, in which we remove the causes of learning difficulties and create a stimulating learning environment. This model is characterized by the creation of homogeneous groups, within which work is much easier because all work is tailored only to those students. Internal differentiation and individualization ensure equality and democracy for all students.

The second type is external or functional differentiation and individualization. Students are divided into homogeneous and permanently distinct groups based on their learning abilities. Work in these groups is based on differentiated educational objectives and content. External differentiation of learning can be inter-school or intra-school. In inter-school education, students are assigned to separate school courses, while in intra-school education, students are grouped within the same school. Student separation can involve all subjects (complete external differentiation) or only certain subjects (partial external differentiation).

The last approach is flexible individualization and differentiation. It involves intertwining heterogeneous and homogeneous groups, regular and graded classes, and partial organizational, spatial, and time-based group separations. A common practice in this approach is to divide students into levels of mathematics, Slovenian language, and foreign language, especially in the third educational period. In this method, the teacher suggests student grouping based on observation, student results, and interests, but the final decision is made by the student. Flexible differentiation can take the form of individually planned lessons, project-based learning, or additional and complementary lessons (Strmčnik, 1993).

### **Supplementary classes**

According to the Primary School Act of the Slovenian education system (Zakon o spremembah in dopolnitvah Zakona o osnovni šoli, 2011, čl. 20, 24), supplementary classes are part of the extended school program, involving additional activities



related to students' interests and optional subjects. Therefore, teachers are obligated to conduct additional classes for students facing learning difficulties. Students participate in supplementary classes throughout the year or only occasionally (as needed). Typically, all students in the class who require additional explanations attend supplementary classes, so they are often conducted in a group setting rather than individually. Supplementary classes are usually taught by the same teacher who instructs the students during regular lessons, although this is not mandatory. The format of conducting additional classes is also not legally defined, so teachers may conduct them within one school hour or multiple times in shorter intervals (e.g., three times a week for fifteen minutes each) (Kesić Dimić, 2008).

### **Collaboration with parents**

Effective collaboration between the teacher and the parents of a student facing learning difficulties is essential at the initial stage and subsequently at all subsequent levels of assistance. The teacher shares their observations with parents and highlights effective adaptations, methods, and work forms, approaches, and strategies. At the initial stage, the focus is primarily on advising parents on how they can support their child at home to achieve better academic results in the school environment. This also provides the teacher with extremely useful information, enabling a better understanding of the student, their learning style, which can then be utilized in organizing and planning teaching (Križnar, 2018; Peklaj, 2016).

### **Assistance from the school counseling center**

If a student facing learning difficulties does not show progress despite assistance from the teacher and other first-degree specialists, additional support is required, involving the school counseling center. Thus, the provision of support moves to the second tier of the model. Support is provided by counseling center staff, such as psychologists, pedagogues, social pedagogues, and special educators. The school counseling center aims to complement and deepen the diagnosis of student deficits using more specialized knowledge than that available to teachers in the school environment, as well as identifying the student's strengths and talents. Based on this assessment, the school counseling center provides advice to the student, their parents, and the teacher. During counseling, the nature of the student's deficits is explained in detail, which allows parents and teachers teaching the student to better understand the origin and nature of learning difficulties (Križnar, 2018).

The school counseling center invites the parents of a student identified with learning difficulties for an individual conversation, during which they comprehensively present findings about the student in an understandable manner. Advisors inquire about the student's homework, learning strategies, attitude toward school, teachers, etc. At the end of the conversation, parents of the student, together with the school counseling center, agree on further assistance and jointly plan future actions. Parents receive guidance and adaptations that can help the child at home. School counseling center staff also inform the student's teacher and all other specialists at the school working with the student about their findings. The school pedagogue and teacher discuss the specifics of the child's functioning, possible adaptations, appropriate assistance strategies, and preparation of necessary teaching materials to provide adequate support to the student. In such discussions, teachers usually confirm whether their observations were accurate and whether the assistance forms provided to the student in the first stage of the model were adequate and sufficiently intense (Križnar, 2018).

In working with a student facing learning difficulties, the school pedagogue primarily focuses on shaping the student's self-image and motivation to learn, as well as preventing potential stigmatization of the student in the school environment. This assistance is provided occasionally. At this stage, the teacher continues to support the student during lessons and supplementary classes, while the school pedagogue initiates an individual assistance project. One of the essential steps is creating evaluation reports written by professionals working with the student. Based on these reports, assistance and support for the student are planned for the future. Evaluation reports and the entire individual assistance project constitute school documentation. This includes a written opinion from the teacher, detailing the procedures by which the teacher assisted the student in the initial stage of assistance (this opinion also describes the student's behavior on school premises and adjustments and forms of assistance during lessons, supplementary classes, and extracurricular activities), proposals for further assistance activities, and other documents (assistance implementation journal, individual work plan, etc.). To create a student's personal file, the school counseling center must obtain written consent from parents due to personal data protection laws (Križnar, 2018; Magajna et al., 2008).

### **Additional individual and/or group assistance**

If the school counseling center and teacher determine that a student requires more intensive assistance and support, they propose to parents to proceed to the third tier of the model, where additional individual and/or group assistance is

organized for students with learning difficulties. This assistance is provided based on the opinion of the school counseling center, which includes the final evaluation of the second stage. Depending on the type and severity of the learning difficulties, more in-depth diagnostic procedures may be conducted at this stage if necessary (Magajna et al., 2008).

The individual and/or group assistance can be provided by teachers conducting classes with students in regular classrooms, other teachers working in the school, special educators, psychologists, or social pedagogues. The assistance aims to develop strategies through which students learn to overcome their specific deficits (e.g., strategies for solving text-based tasks, strategies for independently correcting spelling errors, etc.). Typically, assistance is provided once a week, occasionally it may also be implemented in parts (e.g., 15 minutes three times a week or as needed). Some adjustments are prepared by the teacher themselves, while others are prepared for the teacher and more precisely specified by the person providing individual and/or group assistance in learning (Križnar, 2018; Magajna et al., 2011).

Additional adjustments made at this stage include adapting the format of materials (e.g., fewer tasks per page, more space for notes, highlighting key information, additional tasks as examples to solve, etc.), explanations with additional illustrations, different levels of reading difficulty and written materials, various ways of presenting results, several timing adjustments (e.g., extended time for written assessments, more short breaks during work, etc.), photocopying written materials, as well as adapting the format of knowledge tests, for example, increasing the number of oral questions relative to written ones, using various technical aids (e.g., calculator, reading ruler), and the possibility of specialist support during sessions, etc.

Students with learning difficulties are supported at this tier of assistance for at least 6 months. After this period, the professionals involved in the assistance process together with the child's parents assess the effectiveness of the assistance and support provided so far. They pay particular attention to the appropriateness of new adjustments to lessons and, if necessary, establish new ones or update existing ones. The conclusions from this assessment are included in the final evaluation of the third tier, which is placed in the student's personal file. If it turns out that the assistance still does not bring progress to the student, professionals discuss the next steps together with the parents.

### **Support from external institutions**

At this stage, students who, based on the final evaluation of the third stage, still show no progress and require a more intensive form of assistance are

identified. The school collaborates with external specialized institutions, such as health centers, mental health clinics, etc., where multidisciplinary specialist teams operate. The school engages them for an additional expert opinion and, if needed, additional assistance. The duration of intervention at this stage depends on the extent of the individual's educational needs (Magajna et al., 2008). The primary role of specialists at this support level is to conduct a more detailed diagnostic assessment of learning difficulties and to assess whether the school effectively utilized all sources of support in the preceding three stages of the model. They may organize therapies, workshops, lectures, seminars, recommend publications, and implement other forms of assistance as required. Besides students, their parents, and the school's professional staff are also referred to these institutions. The experts summarize their findings and recommendations in a report, which serves as the basis for a broader meeting involving all stakeholders in the assistance project (class teachers, school staff, and parents). Together, they evaluate the effectiveness of prior assistance efforts and determine whether the support at the fourth level will be adequate to address the student's learning challenges (Križnar, 2018).

### **Program with customized implementation and additional professional assistance**

If specialists from the school and experts from an external institution believe that despite all the support, the student is not achieving the expected learning outcomes, they propose referring the student to a program with customized implementation and additional professional assistance. In this assistance project, even more adjustments and more intensive help are suggested. The task of the school professionals and the external specialized institution is to familiarize the student's parents with the entire counseling process. Parents must include in their application documentation prepared for their child by school staff (class teacher, other teachers working with the child, and the school counseling service) as well as external institutions. This documentation includes: a report from the educational institution about the child, a statement from the school about the implementation of the concept of learning difficulties in primary school, a record of the conversation with the child about the counseling process, professional documentation (psychological, social reports), and a memorandum about cooperation between parents and school staff (this is not a mandatory attachment but is still a useful document demonstrating collaboration at all levels of assistance and the pursuit of a common goal) (Križnar, 2018).

Article 26 of the Law on Counseling for Children with Special Needs (Zakon o usmerjanju otrok s posebnimi potrebami, 2013) stipulates that the Institute of

Education of the Republic of Slovenia must obtain from the applicant (parents or school) a report from the educational institution attended by the child, indicating that continuity of assistance has been provided to the child. This report must include: observations about the child (strengths and weaknesses, social integration in groups, etc.), a prepared work plan for the child by the school based on identified issues, description of the assistance implemented at the school, description of the student's progress compared to the initial situation, description of cooperation with parents, school's proposal regarding the type of assistance the child may still need, and data on the course of learning and academic achievements (Magajna et al., 2008).

The commission prepares an expertise report that includes counseling proposals regarding appropriate teaching programs, type and degree of deficit, obstacles, or disorders, and proposals for adjusting the educational program. Based on this, a decision is made on the necessity or non-necessity of directing a child with special needs to an educational program. If directing a child with special needs to an educational program is justified, the decision specifies: the child's educational needs, the educational program to which the child is directed, the educational institution where the child will be enrolled, the start date of the program or educational institution, the scope, form, and entity providing each additional vocational assistance, tools, space, and equipment, and other conditions necessary for education and training, individuals accompanying the child temporarily or permanently, reducing the number of children in a group/class according to specified standards, and the deadline for checking the correctness of counseling. No later than 30 days after the decision becomes legally binding, an expert team designated by the director of the educational institution will create an individualized program for the child with special needs.

One of the key tasks of the expert group preparing and monitoring the individualized program is to include not only the child, considering their functioning and age, but also the child's parents throughout the entire process. The program must be evaluated in each educational period and adjusted as needed based on the current situation. Students continue to use the school's offered forms of assistance in the first three tiers of the model (adjustment of general classes, supplementary classes, counseling assistance, and individual and/or group forms of help). Upon receiving the decision, the maintenance of existing support is discussed, and the student receives only the most useful forms of assistance.

Additional support at this can only be provided by a special educator, rehabilitation educator, or teacher after additional training in working with students with special needs. Support can take three different forms: assistance in overcoming deficits, barriers, or disabilities, counseling, or support in learning. The schedule and method of providing additional support are tailored to the student's needs and can be provided

individually or in groups, in the classroom or outside of it, in an educational institution or social assistance. In exceptional cases, assistance may also be provided at home. Additional professional assistance is provided once a week and cannot exceed five hours per week, with at least one hour dedicated to counseling services. The method of providing additional substantive assistance is based on an agreement between the student, their parents, teachers, and special educator (Križnar, 2018).

### **Advantages and disadvantages of implementing the five-tier assistance and support model in the Slovenian educational system**

Decision-makers and researchers in the Slovenian education system have appreciated the effectiveness of the procedural implementation of preventive actions in the RTI model. An advantage of the model is the ability to detect general and less distinct learning problems early, providing earlier, simpler, and less intensive forms of learning assistance. Proper early support and frequent monitoring of student progress are factors that help prevent academic failures and identify students who, despite appropriate teaching methods and increased intensity of simpler forms of assistance, show no progress. The RTI model allows for transitioning from accommodations for all students to more intensive forms of assistance for students with specific learning difficulties. Effective support enables students to move up and down levels. Professionals (mobile special educators, consultants) establish appropriate criteria by which students can be moved. The criteria relate not only to the student and their learning difficulties but also to environmental factors (e.g., examining teaching methods, assessing how much assistance can be provided to the student, what support teachers can obtain from other specialists, etc.) (Kavkler, 2011).

On the other hand, some parents argue that the model is ineffective for students with more significant functioning difficulties. They believe that too much time elapses between transitioning from the first to the third stage of the model, where students receive appropriate special educational support. Students with significant needs (e.g., those with deeper levels of autism, significant physical disabilities, etc.) should be directed to the most intensive level of intervention as early as preschool, which is not addressed in the model (Kavkler, 2011).

### **Conclusions in the context of the Polish education system for students with special educational needs**

According to the RTI Action Network, an organization aimed at developing the program, RTI is a “multilevel approach to helping students with difficulties.”

Response to Intervention (RTI) is based on early identification and support of students with learning and behavioral needs. The model is designed for use in decision-making in both general and special education, creating a well-integrated teaching and intervention system driven by child outcome data. Consequently, the RTI concept consistently holds a prominent place in the teaching/learning process in the USA (IDEA, 2004).

The key concepts of the RTI approach emphasize systematic: 1. use of research-based interventions in general education; 2. measurement of student response to these interventions; and 3. utilization of RTI data to inform instruction. Continuous monitoring of the adequacy of student response to instruction is particularly crucial in the RTI approach as a means of determining whether a student should progress from one level to the next by documenting that existing instruction and support are insufficient. Identifying difficulties and selecting appropriate forms of support is done using scientifically validated teaching strategies (Barnett et al., 2006).

The RTI model has been the subject of intense discussions in the field of education since its proposal. American authors indicate that this approach has the potential to eliminate the “wait-to-fail” situation, allowing students to receive specialized assistance much earlier in their school education (Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003). By providing appropriate education to at-risk students, the RTI model has the potential to reduce the number of children referred for special education (Deno et al., 2001). The RTI approach also appears promising in reducing bias in the assessment of students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Marston et al., 2003). On the other hand, researchers note that outcomes are often recorded in a manner that complicates objective, comprehensive assessment of effectiveness, and the entire process, including hiring specialists and training staff, is costly (VanDerHeyden & Jimerson, 2005). Nevertheless, the assumptions of this model are worth considering in the Polish context.

In the Polish education system, students in grades 1–3 are assessed for writing, reading, and numeracy skills. The assessment covers both academic achievements and adaptation to the demands of school life. The collected information may indicate specific difficulties such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, dysorthography, as well as the particular abilities of the student. Students in higher grades are also assessed, and this action takes on a more control-oriented character, especially if diagnostic assessments have been conducted earlier. The aim of these actions is to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the student and suggest support in appropriate areas to prevent the development of problems and facilitate the child’s school life, both in terms of learning and peer relationships. However, these actions lack a systemic dimension and vary in intensity depending on the availability of specialists in schools. Additionally, diagnosing a child, especially indicating problems, often encounters various reactions from parents.



Difficulties related to the functioning and behavior of students in Poland are diagnosed in external institutions such as counseling centers, often without observing and diagnosing the student's functioning in school. Based on these diagnoses, decisions are made regarding the provision of assistance and support, and further steps in the student's education are suggested. Sometimes, cooperation between the school and counseling center in determining the causes of difficulties, providing support and therapy is insufficient. Moreover, actions taken by the school, counseling center, and parents regarding therapy and assistance to the child are usually not coordinated and sometimes even contradict each other.

The RTI approach emphasizes progress monitoring through the use of curriculum-based assessment, student portfolios, teacher observations, and standardized achievement measures based on uniform criteria, which is not present in our solutions. All students are supported from the beginning of the learning concepts, and individualized progress plans are created as needed to meet the child's specific needs, preventing the labeling of students as disabled. Students with difficulties receive the attention they need, regardless of the grade level they are in. Furthermore, a systemic approach to support helps bridge the gap between inclusive and special education.

European countries often use their own strategies and approaches to support students with diverse educational needs. Some, like Slovenia, successfully implement support programs and diagnostic forms based on the RTI model. Researchers present in their studies how RTI can be used to overcome barriers to integration (Grosche & Volpe, 2013) or assess the effectiveness of interventions at different tiers of the model (Jiménez et al., 2010). Of course, most RTI research comes from the USA. There is a clear need for research on RTI in other cultures and educational systems to confirm the effectiveness of this model in new contexts.

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