

THE ATTITUDES AND OPINIONS OF THE TEACHING STAFF CONCERNING INCLUSION IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC: READINESS FOR CHILDREN WITH VARIOUS TYPES OF IMPAIRMENT

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Abstract. *The paper focuses on a part of an extensive research study of the attitudes of teachers in kindergartens, elementary and secondary schools in the Czech Republic to the amendment to the Education Act effective from 1 September 2016, which introduced a new model of assessment of special educational needs.*

According to the amendment, children with SEN are no longer assessed by the type of disability (health, social), but rather by the impact of the disability on their educational needs. These are newly classified into five degrees of ‘support measures’.

The amendment and related regulations also significantly limited the activities of schools specially designed for children with mild intellectual disability. By means of a measure issued by the Minister of Education, the curriculum specially formulated for these schools, which forms an annex to the Framework educational programme, was cancelled.

These measures caused an unprecedented social discussion, which was often marked by strong anti-inclusion attitudes of the general public. Therefore, in May 2017 the research team of the Faculty of Education, Palacký University in Olomouc carried out an extensive measurement (2xxx respondents), which brought a real picture of teachers’ attitudes to the ongoing changes. The paper presents the attitudes of two groups of respondents: teachers in mainstream schools and teachers in special schools. The results showed statistically significant differences in the attitudes and assessments between these two groups of concerning the issue of inclusive or joint education.

Keywords: *teachers, inclusive education, attitudes, quantitative research.*

Introduction

The current understanding of the term inclusion varies. Basically, inclusion can be defined in three different ways. The first definition equals integration,

which is the very opposite of segregation. According to the second definition, inclusion is improved integration or a new quality approach that differs from integration. The best understanding of inclusion is captured by the third definition. According to Lechta (2010), inclusion is considered a state when a disabled person is born into a society, which accepts the person's difference; according to this understanding, it is normal to be different. Such person is born into a society, which is not surprised by the person's difference. Inclusion is based on acceptance of diversity in terms of gender, race, nationality, social background, or health disability. Therefore, everybody is equal in their dignity and rights, and the existence of otherness (diversity) is understood as enrichment and contribution for the society.

In terms of the educational process, inclusion represents the right of all persons to full participation in education, not only partial or conditional as in the case of integration. Inclusive education is understood as an arrangement of a mainstream school that provides adequate education to all participants regardless of their individual differences, type of their special needs, or learning performance. According to Gary (2004), an emphasis is placed on the quality of education and benefit for both parties – individuals with specific needs on the one hand, and intact students, teachers and other staff on the other hand.

On 1 September 2016 an amendment to the Education Act (Act No. 82/2015 Coll.) entered into force, which introduces substantial changes in the system of education. The most important change relates especially to Section 16, which defines a new concept of supporting children with special educational needs. According to the new concept, children, pupils and students with special educational needs (also referred to as SEN) are those whose education requires the application of support measures as a result of their special educational needs. Before the amendment to the Education Act entered into force, these categories had included children with health disability, health disadvantage or social disadvantage. The amendment states the following: for educational purposes children are not classified by the original diagnostic categories, but according to the required adjustment to the conditions of their education.

Attitudes to inclusive education are regularly researched, see for example: M. Schmidt, K. Vrhovnik (2015), I. Zeenat, I. Basheer, K. Ismat; Khan, (2015), V. Sharmila et al. (2015) [3-5].

The implementation of the amendment to the Education Act caused a very heated social debate in the Czech Republic on the role and position of special schools. Especially the position of schools for children with mild mental retardation. By means of a Decree of the Ministry of Education, the educational programme designed especially for these schools (see above) was cancelled. According to many opinions (and according to one interpretation of legal norms), children with mild mental retardation should be primarily educated in mainstream

schools. In this context, it was desirable (and interesting) to analyse the opinions of teachers in the schools concerned.

The present research reacts to the changes in the education of children with SEN in the context of education-related legislative norms in the Czech Republic in 2016.

Methodology

The data were obtained by means of a questionnaire designed by the authors comprising 8 key items; each item had 5 to 15 sub-items. The questionnaire was distributed electronically via educational departments of regional authorities. In this way, the questionnaire allowed quick and economical data collection from a large number of participants (N = 2,467). The questionnaire was designed in May 2017 by 6 members of the project team who ensured internal validity of the questionnaire by making independent comments on the design of the questionnaire and the content of the items. The data collection was performed from June 2017. The items of the questionnaire were primarily designed as semi-closed, multiple-choice with a polytomous choice of answers. In sorting the items the authors preferred the logical perspective to the psychological perspective; regarding the purpose of the study, neither control items nor functional-psychological items were included. The initial 6 items of the questionnaire focused on demographic data (respondents' age, length of teaching experience, highest education, working position, region, and type of educational institution). The remaining items of the questionnaire focused on the experience and needs of teachers in working with children with special educational needs. The data obtained by means of the questionnaire were statistically processed in a special statistical programme SPSS and MS Excel. Regarding the practical purpose of the research, tests of statistical significance were not carried out.

Description of respondents

The sample of respondents was dominated by teachers, class teachers and headteachers older than 30 years with a master university degree with over 10 years of teaching experience. In terms of demographic distribution, the sample included **2,467** respondents with the indicated age, occupational and educational distribution from all regions in the Czech Republic. The sample included respondents from elementary schools (**55.2 %**), secondary schools (**32.5 %**), and kindergartens (**12.3 %**).

Mainstream schools and special schools

The objective of the paper is to monitor the differences in the responses to the items described below between respondents from mainstream schools and special schools – those established in compliance with Section 16, Sub-section 9. Of the total sample comprising 2,467 respondents, 1,694 (**68.7 %**) were from mainstream schools and 773 (**31.3 %**) were from special schools.

For clarity reasons, the answers yes and rather yes were grouped under yes, and no and rather no under no. The answer I don't know was left out. In terms of the statistical method used, this methodological change had no effect on the results.

Objective of the research study

This paper presents one segment of the questionnaire – readiness of schools for joint education in the context of the legislative changes. The respondents assessed the following items (yes, rather yes, rather no, no, I don't know). The objective of the paper is to analyse the following questionnaire item:

Considering the conditions in our school this year, we are ready to educate children with:

Intellectual disability – mild, Intellectual disability – moderate, severe, Physical disability, Severe (long-term) disease, Hearing impairment, Visual impairment, Disrupted communication ability, Autism spectrum disorders, Specific developmental learning disorders, Psychiatric diseases, Insufficient knowledge of the language of instruction, Absence of educational support in the home environment, Socially excluded localities, Extraordinary talent, Child of a different ethnicity.

Research question

- Is there a statistically significant difference in the assessment of educational readiness for children with various types of impairment between respondents from mainstream schools and special schools?

Results

For the purposes of this conference, the presentation includes the above described attitudes of teachers to the changes in the education of children with SEN in the context of legislative changes in 2016. For the purposes of the presentation the answers Yes and Rather yes, and No and Rather no were grouped. Detailed results are specified in Table 1.

Table 1 Attitudes of teachers

| Considering the conditions in our school this year, we are ready to educate: | Mainstream school | | | | Special school | | | |
|---|--------------------------|-------------|-----------|-------------|-----------------------|-------------|-----------|-------------|
| | YES | | NO | | YES | | NO | |
| | Abs. No. | Rel. No. % | Abs. No. | Rel. No. % | Abs. No. | Rel. No. % | Abs. No. | Rel. No. % |
| Intellectual disability – mild | 1,251 | 58.8 | 875 | 41.2 | 228 | 93.1 | 17 | 6.9 |
| Intellectual disability – moderate, severe | 296 | 14 | 1,817 | 86 | 215 | 87.8 | 30 | 12.2 |
| Physical disability | 1,303 | 60.9 | 836 | 39.1 | 221 | 90.6 | 23 | 9.4 |
| Severe (long-term) disease | 1,485 | 71.9 | 581 | 28.1 | 196 | 83.1 | 40 | 16.9 |
| Hearing impairment | 890 | 43.3 | 1,167 | 56.7 | 164 | 68 | 77 | 32 |
| Visual impairment | 756 | 36.8 | 1,300 | 63.2 | 159 | 66.2 | 81 | 33.8 |
| Disrupted communication ability | 1,310 | 63.2 | 763 | 36.8 | 223 | 91.8 | 20 | 8.2 |
| Autism spectrum disorders | 1,279 | 61.4 | 805 | 38.6 | 228 | 93.1 | 17 | 6.9 |
| Specific developmental learning disorders | 1,946 | 90.1 | 213 | 9.9 | 225 | 92.6 | 18 | 7.4 |
| Specific developmental behaviour disorders | 1,522 | 72 | 593 | 28 | 215 | 88.1 | 29 | 11.9 |
| Psychiatric diseases | 607 | 31.3 | 1,332 | 68.7 | 150 | 63.8 | 85 | 36.2 |
| Insufficient knowledge of the language of instruction | 1,241 | 60.2 | 821 | 39.8 | 159 | 72.6 | 60 | 27.4 |
| Lack of educational support in the home environment | 1,558 | 77.1 | 464 | 22.9 | 198 | 88.8 | 25 | 11.2 |
| Socially excluded localities | 1,244 | 64.7 | 679 | 35.3 | 191 | 86 | 31 | 14 |
| Extraordinary talent | 1,856 | 86.6 | 287 | 13.4 | 72 | 32.1 | 152 | 67.9 |
| Child of a different ethnicity | 1,859 | 88.9 | 233 | 11.1 | 217 | 92.7 | 17 | 7.3 |

Results and discussion

It was expected that in most categories of children, teachers in special schools (established in compliance with Section 16, Sub-section 9 of the Education Act) would confirm their readiness to educate children with SEN. This hypothesis was confirmed. Only in one item the respondents in both groups suggest a similar degree of readiness. These were children with specific developmental learning disorders. The answer Yes was indicated by 90.1 % of teachers in mainstream schools and 92.6 % of teachers in special schools. This result is a typical reflection of the situation in the Czech Republic. A majority of these children with SEN used to be educated in mainstream schools in the past. Special schools educated only few of them (only those with the most severe forms

of the disorder). The results suggest that the degree of readiness also depends on teachers' long-term experience with educating groups of children with specific problems.

In the context of the objectives of the proposed legal amendments, it is interesting to watch the attitudes of teachers in mainstream schools (their 'self-confidence') to the education of children with SEN. The highest degree of readiness was indicated in relation to children with specific learning disorders (yes 90.1 %), children of a different ethnicity (yes 88.9 %) and children with lack of educational support in the home environment (yes 77.1 %). Although this is a high degree of declared readiness, the authors consider the latter percentage (children with lack of support in the home environment) insufficient. These children, who are de facto without any major SEN, should be considered by teachers as 'usual clientele'. It is surprising that one-fourth of teachers consider their school insufficiently ready for this group of children.

On the contrary, the smallest degree of readiness for children with SEN was indicated for children with intellectual disability – moderate, severe (yes, rather yes 14 %), children with psychiatric diseases (yes, rather yes 31.3 %) and children with visual impairment (yes, rather yes 36.8 %). The group of children with visual impairment confirms the 'theory of fear of the unknown': despite the low declared readiness for this group of children it is confirmed by practice that the education of a child with visual impairment in an inclusive environment is one of the least problematic. The low proportion of these children and the lack of knowledge of the education of these children results in a low confidence of the school about educating these children. Regarding the educational tradition in the Czech Republic and its consequences, the authors consider the low level of declared readiness for children with severe intellectual disability or psychiatric disease to be natural. In the past, working with children with these SEN was exclusively in the competence of special schools. Teachers without proper special education qualification were not and most of them are still not ready to meet these children's SEN.

Teachers in special school indicate a higher degree of readiness to provide education to those groups of children who represent the largest group of schoolchildren or traditional groups of children in special schools: children with mild intellectual disability (yes, rather yes 93.1 %), children with autism spectrum disorders (yes, rather yes 93.1 %) and children of a different ethnicity (yes, rather yes 92.7 %). Similarly to their colleagues from mainstream schools, teachers in special schools indicate a low level of readiness for children with psychiatric diseases (yes, rather yes 63.8 %), visual impairment (yes, rather yes 66.2 %) and hearing impairment (yes, rather yes 68 %). Considering the proportion of schools (classes) especially established for children with sensory impairment within

Czech special education, this result can also be explained by 'fear of the unknown'.

In the assessment of schools' readiness for educating children with extraordinary talent it is clearly shown that this area is dominated by mainstream schools: readiness is positively assessed by 86.6 % of teachers in mainstream schools as opposed to 32.1 % of teachers in schools specially established for children with SEN.

The authors were surprised by the statements of teachers in mainstream schools concerning their readiness for children with physical disability. Only 60.9 % of them indicated YES to confirm their school's readiness for this group of children with SEN. Compared with children with intellectual disability, where the values were considered normal, here (again facing the conditions of the Czech system of education) the degree of willingness and readiness concerning this group of children is regarded insufficient. For over 20 years, children with physical disability have been educated in mainstream schools and not in special schools as was the case before 1989. A further study is desirable (perhaps of a qualitative nature) that would analyse the internal causes of this phenomenon. Finally, in relation to the issue of migration in European countries, over a half of Czech teachers in mainstream schools (60.2 %) and over two-thirds of teachers from special schools (72.6 %) confirm their readiness for children's SEN also for this reason.

Conclusions

The answer to the research question mentioned above is affirmative. The value of statistical significance of the responses in both samples was measured by means of the *Pearson's chi-squared test at a level of statistical significance of 0.01 for each monitored item.*

There is a statistically significant difference in the assessment of educational readiness for children with various types of impairment between respondents from mainstream schools and special schools. The confirmation of the statistical significance of the differences in the responses of the two significant groups of teachers in the Czech Republic (mainstream and special schools) in all monitored items highlights significant differences between the opinions of the two groups. Experts, officials, and all those who prepare the new normative and methodological documents within the system of Czech education need to take these results into consideration. Different qualification, different educational experience, working in different types of schools – all this results in different attitudes to the ongoing inclusive reform in the Czech Republic.

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