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INTEGRATION IN KINDERGARTEN: YES OR NO? (TEACHERS' AND PARENTS' VIEWS)

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Abstract

The integration of children with special educational needs into mainstream education is currently a highly debated issue among both the professional and lay public in the Czech Republic. The research question for this study focused on identifying the opinions of parents and teachers on the integration of children with special educational needs into common types of nursery schools. The aim of the present study was to determine the degree of awareness among teachers and parents of the integration of students with special educational needs in kindergarten and to describe the positive and negative aspects of such integration from these perspectives. A questionnaire was selected as the basic research method, targeted at kindergarten teachers and parents of kindergarten students. The resulting data were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods. Questionnaire responses indicate that both parents and teachers have a substantial degree of knowledge on the issue; to speculate, extensive media coverage of the integration issue may be the source. The (deficiency of) material and technical equipment in schools as well as concerns about admission of integrated children are described as the main pitfalls. Both sides seem to agree on the difficulties of integrating children with special educational needs. However, the benefits of integration are described by both parents and teachers differently.

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1. Introduction

Issues concerning the integration of children with special educational needs into mainstream classrooms are currently a topic of frequent discussion in the Czech Republic. The issue is highly debated among both the professional and lay public. The subsidy schemata and development programmes of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic in 2015 are proof of the state's initiative efforts. These programmes are focused on prevention of risky behaviour, promotion of inclusive education and support of pedagogical-psychological counselling.

The goal of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports is to specifically and systematically establish inclusive education in Czech society from 2015 onward, which cultivates an equal approach in education towards all pupils, regardless of handicap. For such purposes, the document, The Strategy in Education in the Czech Republic from 2020 (Strategie ve vzdělávání v České republice do roku 2020), was created, which describes the main visions and plans for realization of inclusion-oriented education in the Czech Republic. (http://www.vzdelavani2020.cz/images/obsah/dokumenty/api_2016_2018.pdf)

This paradigm shift will shape pedagogical practice and society's perception of education. The specific focus of concerns and opposition to inclusive education may include material and technical facilities, funding and personnel expenses, professional skills of teachers, and others. It is important to note that the process of implementation of this new schema is a demanding matter and a long-term process, and it is necessary to promote global societal awareness and tolerance along the way.

The aim of this research is to reveal Czech parents' and kindergarten teachers' opinions on the integration of children with specific educational needs into mainstream kindergarten.

2. Issue-Specific Terminology

Strategies for coexistence within a diverse society vary from population to population, but still necessarily exert influence on the process of education. Anderliková (2014) defines the following terms as relevant within the scope of coexistence: exclusion, separation, integration, inclusion.

For the purposes of our research, it is necessary to specify terms inclusion and integration. Inkluze (in Czech), inclusion in Latin, inclusion in English-- as it relates to education-- is understood, according to Bartoňová and Vítková (2007, p. 11), „jako integrace všech žáků do běžné školy se zřeknutím se jakékoli formy etiketování žáků a zrušením tak speciálních zařízení“ (“as integration of all pupils to regular school without any form of labelling and special institutions”). Other authors speak about inclusion being based on equality (Anderliková, 2014), defining it as “kulturní společnost, na jejímž životě se podílejí všichni bez rozdílu“ (“cultural society with everybody being equally involved in its functioning”) (Hájková, & Strnadová, 2010).

The object of our interest is a school environment; thus, the term inclusive school, refers to an educational institution which integrates pupils with specialized educational needs into a population of mainstream students and, according to Průcha, Walterová, Mareš (2001, p. 85), “ vytváří prostor pro realizaci principu rovnosti vzdělávacích příležitostí“ (“creates space for realization of principles of equality in education opportunities”). Such schools admit children with specific educational

needs; physical, linguistic, and ethnic differences are not considered obstacles. (Průcha, Walterová, Mareš, 2001)

Within the field of civil rights and social justice, integration generally means inclusion of an individual into society. In the case of school integration, Vítková (2004, p. 17) introduces a definition of integration based on Brüli (1997), who states that „integrace je snaha poskytnout v různých formách výchovu a vzdělávání jedinci se specifickými vzdělávacími potřebami v co možná nejméně restriktivním prostředí, které optimálně odpovídá jeho skutečným potřebám“ (“integration is an effort to provide education and teaching in various forms for an individual with specific educational needs in the least restrictive environment possible which optimally fulfills his or her actual needs”).

The current state of understanding on the issue of integration is described out by Lechta (2016), when he compares these terms to the metaphors of integration, which is the way how to reach the goal, which is considered to be inclusion. Further, he refers to the Council of Europe in 2013, which notes that, in most countries, conversion to an inclusive educational paradigm has not been completed; these countries, like the Czech Republic, are still working to that end (Lechta, 2016).

Along with the development of the process of integration itself, and as an inevitable component to integration as an inclusion of disparate individuals into mainstream society, terms serving to particularly label an individual's distinctive traits necessarily developed as well. Perhaps most salient to this discussion are such terms as handicapped and disadvantaged or, more specifically, special needs student, as these are the terms which classify the students most directly addressed by the move toward inclusive education.

3. Integration of a child with special educational needs into mainstream kindergarten

Discussion of special educational integration demands, too, consideration of the legislative actions affecting it. Thus, the following address special educational needs in schools (specifically pre-school education):

Act no. 561/2004 Coll. On pre-school, elementary, secondary and tertiary specialized and other education from 24 September 2004.

Public notice of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic No. 73/2005 Coll. On education of children, pupils and students with special educational needs and of extraordinarily gifted children and pupils (9 February 2005)

The Act No. 561/2004 defines the term student with special educational needs. It includes a student with one or more physical disabilities, a student with physical disadvantages, a student with social disadvantages, a gifted student and an extraordinarily gifted student.

Pre-school education is mandatory for children from the age of 3, however, on the basis of current social demand, children younger than 3 years of age are admitted to kindergarten. The document in accordance to which kindergarten education must adhere is the Framework Education Programme for Pre-School Education, which includes a section concerned with education of children with special needs as well as extraordinarily gifted children.

As Blažková (2014) writes, an important step for the idea of an inclusive school in the Czech Republic was the approval of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Successful integration of special-needs students into mainstream kindergarten relies strongly upon cooperation between the teacher and parent(s), as well as that of counselling centres, such as a pedagogical and psychological counselling centre, special pedagogical centres and centres of educational care. This cooperative effort forms the basis for a document the Individual Learning Plan, in which participation is mandatory for everyone involved in any aspect of the student's education. The benefits of this document are described by Zelinková (2001). The Individual Learning Plan enables the pupil to work at a level optimized to their individual needs without being compared with other pupils. It serves as a baseline upon which a teacher can plan individual activities relative to the pupil's skills and level. Parents are also involved in this systematic preparation and they actively assist in their child's reaching his or her goals. And finally, the position of a pupil changes, because he or she is no longer a passive object, but has a certain responsibility for his/her results.

It is vital to explicitly determine the pros and cons of a special-needs student's integration into mainstream kindergarten, cognizant of that specific child's distinctive circumstances, as the nature and degree of an individual student's disabilities and challenges will determine that child's individualized educational plan.

4. Research in the field of integration of children in kindergartens

The research that investigated teachers' feelings about the integration of children with special educational needs in kindergarten was described by Karen P. Nonis (2006).

The aim of our research was to learn parent's opinions on the integration of children into mainstream kindergarten. The research was performed in kindergartens in the Zlín region of the Czech Republic.

5. Research Methodology

The aim of this research was to find out parents' and kindergarten teachers' opinions on the integration of children in regular types of kindergartens; to reveal, on the basis of parents' and teachers' opinions, pros and cons of integration of children with special educational needs mainstream kindergarten and, further, to discover if, according to parents and teachers, the integrated children can have an impact on educational activities in kindergarten more generally.

The research sample is composed of both kindergarten teachers and parents of kindergarten students. The total number of respondents was 152, out of which there were 79 parents and 73 teachers. The research sample was readily available at local schools with which we have previously collaborated, at which we have extant contacts and additional subjects deriving from recommendations by the schools' administrators. The research method was a questionnaire survey. The research tool was the questionnaire itself, designed for both kindergarten teachers and parents of the children that go to pre-school

institutions. The questionnaire included 15 items, out of which there were 2 non-structured questions, 4 half-open questions and 9 structured questions.

After creation of the questionnaire, there was a pilot study carried out, which revealed that some formulations need to be re-designed. Subsequently, we distributed the questionnaire to schools on the basis of personal administration. The return was less frequent in parents, as they received the questionnaires via secondary distribution by the kindergarten teachers.

6. Research Findings

Analysis of the questionnaires revealed that 92% of teacher respondents have an accurate understanding of the concept of integration; most of them even used the term inclusion ("začlenění") specifically. Among parents, responses showed greater variation in their understanding of the term's meaning 86% of responding parents understood the term clearly and accurately, while the rest struggled in demonstrating proper understanding. Among the expressions used were "inclusion, acceptance of the handicapped, school attendance of a child with disability in normal class, etc." ("začlenění, přijetí handicapovaného, navštěvování mateřské školy dítěte s postižením v normální třídě aj."). These percentages are quite high; as we mentioned above, public awareness has been intense in last few years. Diagnostic inquiry into respondents' understanding of the meaning of the term was made via an open-question format, so that the respondents had greater latitude to express themselves.

The next part of the questionnaire was concerned with finding out opinions of the respondents on the advantages of integration of a child with special educational needs into mainstream kindergarten. The teachers involved chose the answer expressing tolerance of the others the most often (26%), followed by acceptance of a child by the collective (17%) and mutual motivation (16%). These answers are reflective of pedagogical practice and values which are preferred by kindergarten teachers. In the case of the parents, the answers were balanced in terms of percentage. The leading answer was integration of a child with a handicap into society (21%), followed by acceptance of a child by the collective and the disposal of all the barriers. In case of this question, the respondents were given an option to add other advantages which were not included. It must be noted that that only 23 of 152 respondents used this option. This option was also provided in the question on disadvantages, for which 68 respondents made use of it. We consider this number to be quite high and attribute it to possible worries of both parents and teachers regarding the whole situation.

As far the disadvantages of the integration of children with special educational needs into mainstream kindergarten, both teachers and parents most often described challenges presented by the material and technical facilities of kindergartens, followed by teacher's choice of finances (36%), which makes these two answers connected. Of parents' answers, the second most frequent answer (33%) on this question was a possibility to influence education (the process of education). In other questions, we received such answers as insufficient awareness of child's needs, non-acceptance of a child with handicap by a group of children, withholding of relevant care, and limiting others.

Additionally, we asked respondents whether a specific type of disability influences integration more or less than other types. However, we must point out that this process is an individual one and that

diagnostic opinions from all competent experts matter. We emphasize that this publication presents the opinions of our respondents only, and does not necessarily reflect the opinions of the authors. 97% of respondents, then, answered yes, that certain kinds of disabilities have a greater influence upon smooth integration than others. The teachers' most frequent answer (49%) was that children with interrupted communication skills are most able to successfully integrate into mainstream kindergartens, followed by children with physical handicaps, children with behavioral disorders, children with sensory impairments and, with the lowest number of affirmative answers, children with mental disorders. Among parents, 35% positively cited integration of children with physical handicaps, followed by children with interrupted communication skills (19%), children with sensory impairments, children with behavioral disorders (7%) and, finally, children with mental disorders (6%). For both parents and teachers, answers may have been influenced by ignorance of the issues, the efforts of the media and particular personal experience. Respondents were queried as to the positive and negative effects of integration on the kindergarten classroom. Of positive impacts, teachers most often chose the answer adaptability of the others (28%), while the parents' most frequent answer was the mutual help (32%). According to parents, negative impacts on educational activity might be created by interruption (37%), too much attention devoted to another pupil (29%), distractedness and time limitations. According to the teachers, educational activities are influenced primarily by time limit (56%), along with too much attention for another pupil and interruption and distractedness.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is important to note that this is an intensive issue requiring an individual approach. We reiterate that the respondents' awareness is largely sound, and the finding that neither parents nor teachers hold a negative opinion on resolving the issue shows promise for the success of integration as a systemic whole. As the questionnaires demonstrate, it is clearly easier to find the negatives of integration of children with special educational needs into mainstream kindergartens than the positives. Nonetheless, positive aspects are undeniably evident as well.

In terms of percentage, the respondents' answers are balanced and we cannot say that, in this case, it is possible to determine one dominant polarity, opinion or belief. We assume that each respondent answered on the basis of his/her experience and available information.

The advantages of integration of children with specific educational needs are described by teachers and parents differently, but the main disadvantage commonly espoused by both is the material and technical facility of buildings and classrooms. This standpoint is logically associated with finance, which is unavoidably a long-term matter.

Integration's impact on educational activities is influenced by several factors. In the case of an integrated pupil, it is necessary, if possible, to ensure the educational process in such manner that its course is minimally eliminated. The major role in this process is played by a school headmaster, a personal assistant and also a teacher's performance. Cooperation between individual participants in the integration of a child with special educational needs-- parents, teachers, headmasters, counsellors, doctors and the like-- is equally essential to the success of the integration process.

Integration of children with special educational needs into mainstream kindergarten is a complex process, and the major priority should be the benefits for all children.

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