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Attitudes of Educational Professionals to the Implementation of Support Measures in the Context of Inclusive Education

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Abstract

In the Czech Republic, a crucial amendment to the Education Act (No. 86/2015 Coll.) has been passed. Effective from 1 September 2016, the amendment introduces the principle of joint education – inclusion in kindergartens, elementary schools and secondary schools in the CR. The present paper provides information about an extensive survey comparing the attitudes of two groups of teachers working in mainstream schools and special schools to the legal provision on inclusive education. The research confirmed significant differences in the readiness and willingness of teachers of both groups to participate in inclusive education. Considerable differences were confirmed between both target groups in almost all aspects of inclusive education. Opinions about the necessity, appropriateness and benefits of this educational model differ. Teachers in special education schools hold significantly more negative attitudes than teachers in mainstream schools. This particularly relates to negative attitudes towards joint education of pupils with impaired cognitive functions. The research brought unique information about the opinions and attitudes of Czech teachers concerning inclusive education. It brought fundamental findings in the form of rejection of this model by teachers from special schools. The research confirmed positive opinions among teachers from mainstream schools. The results are crucial for the organization and management of the Czech educational system. The results make it possible to compare other countries which opted for the model of inclusive education.

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Keywords: Disability; school; teachers; special education teachers; attitudes; laws on education.

1. Introduction

In the Czech Republic, an amendment to the Education Act has been passed that provides for a new model of educating children, pupils and students with special educational needs by means of, inter alia,



support measures. According to the amendment, these measures should be “claimable and free of charge.”

The amendment will come into effect on 1 September 2016. (Amendment to the Education Act No. 82/2015 Coll.) An essential prerequisite for successful joint education of children, pupils and students with health disability, health disadvantage or another disadvantage (collectively called special educational needs) is acceptance by professionals in education. In this context, Vítková (Vítková 2010) compared approaches to inclusive education in the Czech Republic, Germany and Wales.

On the one hand, for over ten years pupils with special educational needs (formally of any depth) have been guaranteed the right to education in a mainstream school in the respective catchment area – Act No. 561/2004 Coll. On the other hand, only some schools are ready for effective education of a specific pupil with special educational needs (also referred to as SEN). In some cases this is due to objective reasons (lack of funding); in some cases the cause is low motivation of the teaching staff and school management. A similar conclusion was formulated by Chrzanowska (Chrzanowska, 2010a).

The newly adopted amendment will deepen and strengthen the concept of educating pupils with SEN as a usual and integral part of educational activities of every school. However, special schools will remain in existence with a modified environment for pupils with various types of health disadvantage. In the Czech Republic (referred to as CR) is not realistic to assume a quantitative development of these special schools (their establishment is very expensive), but it will be increasingly important to strengthen the readiness of mainstream schools for educating all groups of pupils. However, Horvath's opinion (Horvath, 2008) has also been confirmed, according to which experience from Germany has shown wider possibilities of special education in inclusive schools.

Therefore, it is essential to know the opinions of educational professionals (also referred to as EP) because they have a decisive role in the implementation of the intentions stipulated in the amendment to the Education Act. The motivation and attitudes of teachers is also considered essential by Potměšil (2010) or Vaďurová, Pančocha (2010).

The purpose of the paper is to present an excerpt from an extensive research report mapping the attitudes of more than 4,000 teachers from all over the CR. A specific objective is to highlight significant differences in the perception of the newly designed model of education among teachers in mainstream schools and special schools, i.e. separately designed for educating pupils with health disability (also referred to as HD). Should we seriously consider the concept of “school for all” or “equal opportunities and access to education” – see the Declaration of the European Agency (European Agency for Development in SNE, 2011), we need to be able to deal with any divergent opinions about inclusive education.

2. Research questions

This paper presents a part of a research study providing answers to the following questions:

- a) What is the general attitude of teachers in mainstream and special schools to the amendment to the Education Act concerning the development of inclusive education?

b) How do teachers assess the readiness of their schools for educating pupils with various types of SEN?

c) Which support measures do teachers consider essential for the development of inclusive education?

d) What are the differences between the attitudes of teachers in mainstream schools and special schools to educating pupils with various types of SEN?

3. Research methodology

Regarding the objectives of the research (see above), the authors used the first stage of the Evidence Based Practice approach to investigate the research phenomenon. The research was based on respecting the following research question: “What are the information-saturated attributes of the current opinions and attitudes of teachers in the Czech Republic concerning the conditions for educating children, pupils and students with special educational needs stipulated by the amendment to the Education Act?”

The areas mentioned above are rather extensive (information, attitudes, identification with a statement, etc.) and difficult for a correct selection of appropriate methods to investigate the research phenomenon. Therefore, the mixed-approach design was chosen. To obtain basic processable data the authors used an *ex post facto* quantitative approach with a complementary parallel qualitative approach. The data were retrieved by means of a questionnaire (own design, i.e. non-standardized) and focus group (information saturation based on an in-depth interview). The questionnaire of an own design was developed for the purposes of retrieving data from a large number of respondents in a simple and intuitive form; therefore it was administered in an online environment.

The area of socio-demographic characteristics was covered by the first ten items of the questionnaire. To determine the agreement/disagreement with the statements, information or propositions, the following answers were provided: “Agree – Rather agree – Rather disagree – Disagree”, some items also contained the “I don’t know” option. To capture the current attitudes and opinion preferences of assistant teachers the Likert scale (7 point) was applied, where 1 = least important; 7 = most important. In the final part of the questionnaire the respondents had an opportunity to provide their own experience, ideas or suggestions concerning the content of the research.

In total, the questionnaire covered 21 content areas (some items were complemented with sub-questions). The total number of respondents (teachers) who completed the questionnaire was 4,123. The selection of respondents was conducted by means of deliberate exhaustive sampling. In the process of data collection and analysis, respondents’ anonymity was guaranteed. The inclusion criterion was the current position of teachers and their willingness to participate in the research.

During the first classification stage the authors sorted and checked the completeness of the data, which were then used to perform calculations of absolute and relative frequencies, including mean values and the basic measure of variability. The second classification stage was performed by means of the SPSS and Statistica programmes and included comparison approaches. During an analysis of the questionnaire items, the real number of responses was used, thus representing a separate exhaustive set (100 % in a specific area/item). The research involved 132 assistant teachers (3.2 %); 2,736 teachers (66.4 %); 1,154 headteachers (28 %); 17 school psychologists (0.4 %); and 84 school-based special

education teachers (2 %). The research sample comprised 739 (17.9 %) men and 3,384 (82.1 %) women. The gender distribution corresponds with the basic sample of teachers in the CR. This paper presents the results of the following groups of respondents: teachers (including headteachers) in elementary schools and special schools.

Table 1. Respondents by type of school.

	Mainstream		Special		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Kindergarten	550	15.1%	29	6.0%	579	14%
Secondary	698	19.2%	100	20.7%	798	19.4%
Elementary	2,392	65.7%	354	73.3%	2,746	66.6%
Total	3,640	100.0%	483	100.0%	4,123	100%

More than twice as many respondents from schools B compared with respondents from schools S were in kindergartens; on the contrary, more respondents from schools S were in elementary schools (73.3 % as opposed to 65.7 % of respondents from schools M). In the last type – secondary school – the numbers of respondents from schools M and S were comparable.

4. Results

Table 2. The amendment to the Education Act is a good step towards improved education of pupils with SEN.

Respondent	Mainstream		Special		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Agree	296	8.3%	30	6.4%	326	8.1%
Rather agree	1,360	38.1%	126	26.8%	1,486	36.8%
Rather disagree	740	20.8%	145	30.8%	885	21.9%
Disagree	319	8.9%	117	24.8%	436	10.8%
I don't know	851	23.9%	53	11.3%	904	22.4%
Total	3,566	100.0%	471	100.0%	4,037	100.0%

The assessment of the benefit of the amendment as a means of improving the conditions for educating pupils with SEN resulted in some differences in the answers of both groups of respondents. Respondents from mainstream schools (referred to as M) assess the amendment to the Education Act more positively than respondents from special schools (referred to as S). In the former group the responses “Agree” and “Rather agree” were selected by 46.4 % of respondents, in the latter group ‘only’ by 33.3 % of respondents. Correspondingly, a negative assessment of the amendment was more frequently indicated by respondents from schools S. A logical consequence of a lower degree of awareness of respondents from schools M is their more frequently indicated answer “I don't know” – in this case 23.9 % of respondents as opposed to 11.3 % of respondents from schools S. This suggests a significantly more reserved attitude to the amendment to the Education Act. The reason may be the influence of the media, some of which overly accentuate the adoption of the amendment as a step towards gradual “elimination” of special education.

Table 3. Pupils with mild intellectual disability should be educated in:

Respondent	Mainstream		Special		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Mainstream school and class	1,058	29.6%	13	2.7%	1,071	26.5%
Special class in mainstream school	1,652	46.3%	147	30.9%	1,799	44.5%
Special school	735	20.6%	306	64.3%	1,041	25.7%
I don't know	124	3.5%	10	2.1%	134	3.3%
Total	3,569	100.0%	476	100.0%	4,045	100.0%

The answers of the two groups of respondents differ considerably. For teachers in mainstream schools it is much easier to imagine or consider it natural to educate these pupils directly in a usual class in a mainstream school (nearly 30 % of respondents) or in a special class in a mainstream school (nearly 45 % of respondents). To educate these pupils in a separate special school is considered appropriate by only one-fifth of respondents – but almost two-thirds of respondents from special schools! In total – 76 % of teachers from mainstream schools consider it natural to educate pupils with MID in these schools.

Many special education teachers working in special schools might interpret this result as an expression of ‘naivety’ on the part of their colleagues from mainstream schools. The research team leaves the interpretation of this result more open. However, it points to unnecessary politicization and ideologization of this issue (educating pupils with MID) by some circles in education and the society.

Table 4. Pupils with moderate and severe intellectual disability should be educated in:

Respondent	Mainstream		Special		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Mainstream school and class	27	0.8%	1	0.2%	28	.7%
Special class in mainstream school	452	12.7%	10	2.1%	462	11.5%
Special school	2,972	83.6%	461	96.8%	3,433	85.2%
I don't know	102	2.9%	4	0.8%	106	2.6%
Total	3,553	100%	476	100%	4,029	100%

While the group of teachers from mainstream schools significantly prefer education of pupils with MID in mainstream schools, in the case of pupils with more severe forms intellectual disability, both groups of teachers prefer a modified environment of special schools. Teachers from schools M are also more inclined towards a special class in a mainstream school.

The following should be noted: Even though the opinions concerning these pupils might be logical, reality is often different. A special school (appropriate to the degree and type of disability) need not be and is often not available in the place. Parents refuse to place for example an 8-year-old child in a boarding school (only few schools of this type in the CR). Therefore, pursuant to the provisions of Section 36 of the Education Act such pupil will attend a mainstream school in the catchment area. The

task for all persons involved, even if they are aware that a special school is more appropriate, is to ensure the educational needs of such pupil in a mainstream school.

Table 5. Pupils with physical disability should be educated in:

Respondent	Mainstream		Special		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Mainstream school and class	2,275	64.0%	240	50.4%	2,515	62.4%
Special class in mainstream school	679	19.1%	101	21.2%	780	19.4%
Special school	456	12.8%	114	23.9%	570	14.2%
I don't know	142	4.0%	21	4.4%	163	4.0%
Total	3,552	100.0%	476	100.0%	4,028	100.0%

Pupils with physical disability are considered, in accordance with the general knowledge, as “the most integrable” group. Therefore, in the present paper they are considered a type of control group in relation to the group of pupils with intellectual disability. The results are very surprising. It is not surprising that mainstream school prevailed in both groups of respondents. A surprising fact is that ‘only’ 50 % of teachers in special schools chose this option. Almost one-fourth of these teachers believe that pupils with physical disability should be educated in special schools.

If there is a high-quality special school for pupils with physical disability, it is certainly possible for these pupils to be educated according to their requirements or their legal guardians’ requirements in these schools. However, in a modern society, physical disability itself should never be a reason for exclusion from mainstream education.

Table 6. Pupils with mental disorder should be educated in:

Respondent	Mainstream		Special		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Mainstream school and class	315	8.9%	35	7.4%	350	8.7%
Special class in mainstream school	679	19.2%	79	16.7%	758	18.9%
Special school	1,973	55.7%	299	63.2%	2,272	56.6%
I don't know	576	16.3%	60	12.7%	636	15.8%
Total	3,543	100.0%	473	100.0%	4,016	100.0%

Concerning this group of pupils, both groups of respondents agreed (only for the second time in the assessment of pupils with various disadvantages) that these pupils should be educated in special schools (for the first time this concerned pupils with moderate and severe mental disability). A total of 63.2 % of respondents from schools S and 55.7 % of respondents from schools M prefer this educational alternative. Furthermore, 16.7 % of respondents from schools S and 19.2 % of respondents from schools M prefer a special class in a mainstream school, while individual integration is preferred by only 8.9 % of respondents from schools M and 7.4 % of respondents from schools S. It appears that the degree of stigmatization associated with the ‘label’ of mental disorder or mental diagnosis is still

relatively high both in the society and among teachers. To put it simply, people ‘are afraid’ of individuals with a mental disorder.

Table 7. Joint education of all children in mainstream schools is significant for the society.

Respondent	Mainstream		Special		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Agree	768	21.6%	30	6.3%	798	19.8%
Rather agree	1,358	38.2%	94	19.7%	1,452	36.0%
Rather disagree	1,071	30.1%	209	43.8%	1,280	31.7%
Disagree	360	10.1%	144	30.2%	504	12.5%
Total	3,557	100.0%	477	100.0%	4,034	100.0%

The item focused on a general opinion about the benefit of joint education for the society. The answers of both groups of respondents are contradictory. Almost 60 % of respondents from schools M agree that this educational model is significant for the society. On the contrary, 73 % of respondents from schools S believe that joint education is not significant for the society. The answers of the two groups are totally different.

Table 8. Joint education has no future (it is only a fashion trend that will subside).

Respondent	Mainstream		Special		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Agree	581	16.4%	198	41.8%	779	19.4%
Rather agree	1,050	29.7%	150	31.6%	1,200	29.9%
Rather disagree	1,337	37.8%	88	18.6%	1,425	35.5%
Disagree	572	16.2%	38	8.0%	610	15.2%
Total	3,540	100.0%	474	100.0%	4,014	100.0%

This item again confirms significant differences in the perception of social (as well as specific) aspects of joint education. This particular item was included in the assessment due to frequent discussions on this issue in professional as well as mainstream media – and also among teachers. Again, significant differences were observed between the two groups of respondents.

73.4 % of teachers in schools S agree with this statement but only less than a half of teachers from schools M – 46.3 %. While teachers from schools M are more or less divided in halves (a larger part of respondents disagree); three-fourths of teachers from schools S prefer the ‘fashion trend’ concept.

5. Discussion

Regarding the level of social discourse on the status of minorities in the CR, the authors anticipated a more negative assessment of the concept of “joint education” in compliance with the amendment to the Education Act by teachers from special schools. The degree of their scepticism regarding future development is regarded alarming. On the other hand, teachers in mainstream schools showed a high degree of empathy in their approach to various groups of pupils with health disability, including those with mild intellectual disability. Currently there is a stormy debate in the CR concerning the educational model for this group of pupils, which surpassed the area of education and became a general

political issue even commented on by the president. It appears that public authorities in the area of education must strive to explain to teachers the plans and objectives of educational policy. The reason is that respondents in both groups are very careful in their assessment of the benefit of the newly approved amendment to the Education Act. Their experience based on previous 'reformative' efforts of the educational system fully justifies and explains this approach. The ultimate question is which educational model (special class versus inclusive class) is more appropriate for children with impaired cognitive functions.

Considering the fact that not even the professional community are consistent in their opinions concerning the 'place of education' of pupils with intellectual disability, the findings of the present research study regarding the place of education of pupils with physical disability are very surprising. Almost a half of teachers from special schools believe it is necessary for physically disabled pupils to be placed in a special institution!

Our research brought key findings in relation to the readiness of teachers from both types of schools for the presence of children with a mental disorder.

The number of children with signs of mental disorders taken care of by child psychiatrists or psychologists is estimated to be several thousands in the CR! Within the current system of support, a majority of them 'have not reached' the status of a pupil with health disability, sometimes they were considered pupils with health disadvantage. However, many of these child patients suffer from such forms of disorders that absolutely do not prevent their presence in usual classes in mainstream schools. The fact that a majority of teachers in both groups believe that these children should be placed in specialized institutions is an important reason to change the attitudes and awareness of the public – not only the lay community but also educated professionals in the society.

Finally, the paper presents two items aimed at general opinions of teachers about the model of inclusive education. And again there is a significant inconsistency between the answers of both groups of respondents. 6 out of 10 teachers from mainstream schools recognize the social benefit of this model. Teachers from special schools again confirmed their positive opinion about the benefit of special education.

The findings presented in this paper along with the differences in the attitudes and assessment suggest an inclination towards the 'trendiness' of joint education, which is considered exhausted with no future. Teachers from special schools believe that in the future the educational policy of (probably not only) the Czech Republic will return to separate educational streams for intact pupils and pupils who require special educational support (not only) as a result of a lack of health.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

The research brought unique information about the opinions and attitudes of Czech teachers concerning inclusive education. It brought fundamental findings in the form of rejection of this model by teachers from special schools. The research confirmed positive opinions among teachers from mainstream schools. The results are crucial for the organization and management of the Czech

educational system. The results make it possible to compare other countries which opted for the model of inclusive education.

The following suggestions indicate possible applications of the results of the research study:

- Basic research findings – attitudes, expectations and assessments provide a picture of teachers' opinions concerning various areas of educating pupils with SEN. According to the results, there is a large space for increasing teachers' awareness, their support and increasing their competences for working with various groups of pupils with SEN.
- Detailed and practically based demonstration and explanation of the significance of support measures as a new model of supporting pupils with SEN.
- Focus on interdisciplinary collaboration between educational professionals, parents, pupils and other experts.
- Gradual deliberate change in the attitudes of teachers in special schools, who show negative and sometimes even 'hostile' attitudes to educating pupils with SEN in mainstream schools.
- Support of schools that are not fully prepared for the model pursuant to the amendment to the Education Act – in terms of methodology, coordination, and didactics. Possible use of the capacities of special schools (teachers) to support their colleagues from mainstream schools without appropriate qualification.
- Further education of teachers from mainstream schools without special education or related qualification.
- Sufficient number of professional and qualified special education teachers in mainstream schools.
- Increase in the salaries of teachers working with pupils with special educational needs in the conditions of mainstream as well as special education.
- Improved readiness of schools for working with pupils with mild intellectual disability (in order to prevent social exclusion of these pupils in mainstream schools). In exceptional cases, support of mainstream schools that educate pupils with moderate and severe mental disability (depending on the number of these pupils).
- Use of the research data to prepare and implement specific quantitative and qualitative surveys aimed at measuring partial aspect of the new educational model.

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