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# FRIENDSHIP BY THE POINT OF CHILDREN´S VIEW AT THE CZECH KINDERGARTEN

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## *Abstract*

On 1 September 2016 an amendment to the Education Act came into effect which introduces an inclusive approach in schools. An alleged advantage is the support of socialization and personalization of intact children and those with special educational needs in the real school environment. This amendment changes the conditions of education (not only) in kindergartens. The objective of the paper is to present how children think about internalization in the content of the new conditions in Czech kindergartens. A qualitative research study was performed through an interview with 33 preschool children. This is the partial outcome of the research and these data are related to other parts of the research project – Reflection of researches (ICERI 2018, Seville, Spain), Love in the children's life (ECCE 2018, Moscow, Russia), Structuring of internationalizating (ECE 2017, Brighton, UK). This paper was written as part of a grant project entitled Social aspects of inclusion in basic education in the context of international research (the research is part of an international project – Inclusive Education, No. 4401/11, Institute for Research and Development, Faculty of Education, Palacký University, Olomouc, Czech Republic).

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## 1. Introduction

For several decades, Czech education has been subject to stormy development. This is due to political and social changes in the country and international policy trends. The fundamental aim of today's educational concept is to provide equal conditions for lifelong learning that has the potential to transform our society into the so-called learning society.

During the process of transformation of Czech education over the last thirty years, there have already been three waves of change:

1. Transformation of the concept of education from encyclopaedic learning to the development of key competences (after 1989),

2. Integration, as a result of which special schools were closed and replaced with open schools (in 2008 a total of 47.1 % of all children with health disability were integrated in mainstream schools),

3. Development and support of inclusive schools – current trend in Czech education (Stolinská, Rašková, & Šmelová, 2016).

The third wave of the transformation of Czech education responds to the visions defined in the Strategy for Education Policy until 2020 (MŠMT (1)) and is legally regulated by the amendment to the Education Act in the Czech Republic (1 September 2016) (MŠMT (2)) focusing on the application of inclusion in real school settings.

In the Czech Republic the issue of inclusion is concerned with the education of children with special educational needs, including children with health disability, talented children, and foreigners. The project implemented by the Faculty of Education, Palacký University focuses on the area of health disability.

The situation is illustrated by means of the two table 1 and 2 below, which present the numbers of children with health disability in mainstream kindergartens in the Olomouc District.

**Table 01.** Number of children in mainstream elementary schools in the school year 2018/2019

| School year 2018/19 | Kindergartens Olomouc District | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Children in kindergartens total | with health disability | % of children with health disability |
| Children in mainstream kindergartens total | 8,942 | 125 | 1.4 |
| In mainstream classes | 8,904 | 87 | 1.0 |
| In special classes | 38 | 38 | 100.0 |

(Children in 'usual' elementary schools, without elementary schools specially established for children with special educational needs)

The numbers of children with special educational needs are not necessarily predicative as regards actual problems which may be associated with the education of such children. The following table 2, which breaks down the individual general numbers, may be seen as more expressive.

**Table 02.** Children in kindergartens (mainstream) by the type of health disability in the school year 2018/19

| Children in kindergartens (mainstream schools) by the type of health disability | Kindergartens Olomouc District | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Number of individually integrated children | Number of children in special classes | Total number of children with health disability |
| Mental disability | 12 | 0 | 12 |
| Moderate disability | 5 | 0 | 5 |
| Severe disability | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Hearing impairment | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| Severe disability | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| Visual impairment | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Severe disability | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Severe speech disorders | 6 | 36 | 42 |
| Severe disability | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Physical disability | 3 | 0 | 3 |
| Severe disability | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Multiple disability | 5 | 2 | 7 |
| Deafblind | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Autism | 24 | 0 | 24 |
| Severe developmental disorders | 35 | 0 | 35 |
| TOTAL | 87 | 38 | 125 |

(Source: G. Bělíková, Regional Authority of the Olomouc Region, Department of education and youth)

## 2. Problem Statement

The school is considered a very important environment for the realization of social situations. Preschool children are often exposed to social formation and communicative demands in everyday interactions with adults, which causes confusion and uncertainty. This can be inappropriately reflected in children's activities in the form of routine. Therefore, involvement of an adult in children's life worlds is important (Corsaro, 1988). The adult-child interaction is a feature of a friendly culture. Cultural routine in preschool children has productive as well as reproductive qualities. The role of the teacher is to provide children with the opportunity and means for sharing their understanding and awareness of their place in the group (Corsaro & Rizzo, 1988). The teacher thus supports children's social and emotional competences. In kindergartens, it appears very useful to foster this development through supporting internalization (= developing the concept of internalization). Internalization is an important aspect in the life of adults as well as children. Parents are nervous if their child has no friends, adolescents are unhappy if they have no friends. In general, people who have friends are happier in their life (Hartup & Stevens, 1999).

In a kindergarten setting, two patterns of behaviour occur within the concept of internalization (Rizzo & Corsaro, 1988):

1. Social participation, in which children are rarely engaged in solitary play, and when children are left alone, they try to enter one of the ongoing episodic games of others.

2. Protection of interactive space; children tend to prevent other children from entering (e.g. during a game).

Obviously, the kindergarten is the place of significant interactions during internalization, which support the process of socialization and subsequent personalization. A significant pro-inclusive argument in the area of education policy is the fact that integration supports social development of all children – both integrated and intact – in a real school environment (Ekins & Grimes, 2009). This aspect supported the researchers' efforts to reflect on the teacher-controlled development of children's positive relationships in an inclusive kindergarten environment.

The research project Social aspects of inclusion in basic education in the context of international research (the research is part of an international project – Inclusive Education, No. 4401/11, Institute for Research and Development, Faculty of Education, Palacký University, Olomouc, Czech Republic) focuses on the effects of inclusion on multiple levels – research on elementary school teachers, sociometry in primary schools, and currently focus is on the issue in question in kindergartens.

## 3. Purpose of the Study

The objective of the present qualitative research study was to determine the perspective of the issue of internalization as seen by preschool children in the context of joint activities, satisfying their own needs, and strengthening their own status.

## 4. Research Methods

The group of participants comprised 33 preschool children aged 5 to 6 years. All participants attended kindergarten, where the interviews took place. The responses to each question were classified into specific categories.

## 5. Findings

### 1. Who are your friends?
A) One name specified – 14 children
B) Two names specified – 10 children
C) Three or more names specified – 9 children

Results:

The participants were aware of the concept of internalization. The persons identified as friends were always their peers; the responses differed in terms of the number of friends and gender.

Examples of children's responses:
*Matýsek*
*Tomášek Jílek and Sofinka Raichová*
*We are friends with Adámek and Evička and with Jituška and Tomášek*

**2.  Why are they your friends?**

A)  Joint play in a general sense – 15 children

B)  Specific joint play (usually sports activities and playing with toys) – 6 children

C)  Other reasons (e.g. we help each other, we make something together, etc.) – 10 children

D)  I don't know – 2 children

Results:

The reasons for internalization as specified by the participants included sharing in various activities (usually playing games) in a general as well as specific sense. They also specified other reasons suggesting children's positive behaviour.

Examples of children's responses:

*Because we play together most of the time. Every day in kindergarten.*

*Because I like to play football outside with Tomášek Kaňarik.*

*Because we play nicely with blocks.*

*Because we help each other.*

**3.  What do you like to do with your friends?**

A)  Joint play/games in a general sense – 4 children

B)  Specific joint play/games (usually sports activities and playing with toys) – 28 children

C)  Unanswered – 1 child

Results:

In terms of internalization, the dominant joint activities as specified by the participants included playing a game or games.

Examples of children's responses:

*I play*

*I play with Evička, Terezka and Markétka because we always want to play hide-and-seek, tag and fairies*

**4.  What do you like about your friends?**

A)  Things (usually <u>clothing and decorations,</u> e.g. printed T-shirts, hair clips, chains with charms, etc., or <u>games and toys,</u> e.g. dolls, Play Station, etc.) – 18 children

B)  Joint activity (usually sports activities and playing games) – 8 children

C)  Positive behaviours (e.g. smiling, nice behaviour, etc.) – 6 children

D)  I don't know – 1 child

Results:

A positive opinion about the participants' friends was associated with their ownership of a thing, usually clothing, decoration or toy, and with joint activity and positive behaviours.

Examples of children's responses:

*Because Přema wears a dinosaur T-shirt*

*Sometimes I play with a track, somebody builds it and then they let me play and I drive my cars there. And then I take out wooden blocks, the flat ones, and I put them together and that's all.*

*They don't beat me*

5. **Do you think it is important for you to have friends?**
    A) Affirmative response without explanation – 8 children
    B) Affirmative response with explanation (joint play, joint activity – searching for toys, lending toys, etc.; elimination of loneliness; mutual positive behaviours) – 21 children
    C) I don't know – 1 child

Results:

The importance of internalization was perceived by the participants through joint activities with others, including games but also other activities.

Examples of children's responses:

*Yeah*

*Yeah. Otherwise I couldn't play with anyone and I'd be alone.*

*We need to play together, it's important*

*I need them, so that somebody comes to visit me*

## 6. Conclusion

Already in the preschool age, children are able to establish relationships with their peers. The need for a relationship suggests a degree of the child's maturity. In terms of internalization, a preschool child has a choice. Peer relationships in the preschool age are usually symmetric, both peers are equal, they have similar competences and status. From a psychological perspective, an important aspect is especially agreement in the area of external features and manifestations, children's need for shared activity is stronger.

The psychological statement concerning internalization from the child's perspective has been fully confirmed. The participants have clearly confirmed the generally acknowledged and fixed criteria for the selection of friends. Significant criteria at this age include a link with a specific peer or peers; mutual sharing in various activities (usually playing games); nice appearance and positive behaviour; ownership of things that children like or that resemble their own things.

At this age, the selection of friends is not influenced by any types of impairment; children are not affected by social prejudices. For a preschool child it is important to satisfy one's needs; internalization is strongly affected by matching needs and interests.

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