Inclusive education of pre-school children with special educational needs in kindergartens

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Abstract

The current trends in the education of individuals with special needs include their inclusion in the mainstream education system. Needs of pre-school children are totally individual at any age, especially in the context of their psychomotor, linguistic and personal development, while substantial discrepancy is particularly evident in the case of children with special educational needs (= SEN). The text research aims to map kindergarten teachers’ attitudes towards inclusive education for children with SEN, to describe the risks of inclusive education of children with SEN and to map the current situation in the use of methods and forms of work aimed at inclusive education in kindergartens in the Czech Republic.

1. Introduction

The current trends in the education of individuals with special needs include their inclusion in the mainstream education system. The term "inclusion" (from the Latin "inclusio") can be loosely explained as acceptance into a whole, i.e. in the case of people with disabilities into the general population, and in the educational context into a regular school. The aim of inclusive education is to ensure equal access and
equal opportunities in education for all individuals with SEN (= with Special Educational Needs), regardless of the form of their specific needs. (Booth, Ainscow, 2007) The inclusion leads to "merge" of the minority (i.e., individuals with disabilities / special educational needs) and the majority (i.e., intact population / intact peers). (Slowík in Bendová in Skutil, Zíkl et al., 2011) In the context of educating children with special educational needs we talk about inclusive classes that represent an educational environment that is open to all without any discrimination and prejudices (i.e., to children with special educational needs as well as to socially disadvantaged children, foreigners, etc.). (Berberichová in Bendová in Skutil, Zíkl et al., 2011) Inclusive classes create an appropriate educational environment as well as for gifted and talented children. (Havigerová, 2011) Inclusive classes offer children with SEN the opportunity to learn together with their peers, to learn in heterogeneous groups (note: a part of social learning), to engage in education in a way that suits their skills and needs, in a safe environment that enhances their self-esteem and confidence. The teachers have a facilitator role of actively teaching children (note: they are not only mentors). (Berberichová in Bendová in Skutil, Zíkl et al., 2011) In relation to the inclusiveness evaluation of the environment (i.e., the current status, perspectives), it is necessary to analyse the relevant components, i.e., ethical, sociological, professional, political and practical components. (Lechta, 2010)

The fact that within education children are encouraged by tasks and challenges appropriate to their stage of development, teachers are able to reflect on the different educational needs of "all children" (i.e., children from socio-culturally disadvantaged background, gifted children, children with disabilities, etc.) and can overcome potential barriers to teaching and assessment of individual children and their groups, can be seen as the basic features of inclusive education facilities or inclusive approach to education. (Květoňová et al., 2009)

It should be noted that the current educational model from kindergarten to high school in the Czech Republic only gradually accepts pro-inclusive measures, and that in the area we are currently facing many organizational, legal, personnel, material, professional (particularly methodical-didactic) shortcomings. (Institute for Information on Education, 2010)

"National Action Plan for Inclusive Education" (NAPIE) and also the Support Centre for Inclusive Education were created and accepted by Czech government, at the level of primary and secondary schools, in order to eliminate these shortcomings, as well as to improve the quality of inclusive education.

The experience of inclusive kindergarten teachers however shows that the pre-school children cannot be treated as a homogeneous group. (Zíkl, 2011) Needs of pre-school children are totally individual at any age, especially in the context of their psychomotor, linguistic and personal development, while substantial discrepancy is particularly evident in the case of children with SEN. (Jordan et al., 2009) Children (including children with special educational needs) learn in different ways, at different speeds, they also differ in their family backgrounds, and it is therefore important not to make conclusions only on the basis of their belonging to the language, culture, social or ethnic origin, or the type and degree of disability. It is always necessary to analyse in detail their special educational needs and the planned support for children with SEN (=special educational need) / to plan the practice of education of a child with SEN in close co-operation with parents. In practice, this means creating an educational environment and choose a style of education which corresponds to the needs of individual children as well as their families. (Lukas, 2012)
2. Problem Statement and Purpose of the Study

Due to the fact that currently the societal tendency supporting inclusive education for individuals with special educational needs has been growing, since a child in early childhood education, it is necessary to map the readiness of kindergartens in the Czech Republic in the area of inclusion of children with special educational needs. Furthermore, to define the problematic areas of the inclusion of pre-school children with SEN and subsequently focus on them within the undergraduate or/and postgraduate training of kindergarten teachers.

Inclusion in the field of special education in the Czech Republic is a relatively new issue (especially in the level of pre-school education), and any research survey of wide character has not been implemented so far in this area. The issue of inclusion of pre-school age children with SEN is not adequately described in Czech written literature. It can be assumed that a national-wide character survey will bring suggestions for improving the inclusive education of pre-school children with SEN (e.g. in the form of supportive study and methodological materials, teacher training, modifying undergraduate training of kindergarten teachers, etc.).

The purpose of the presented research survey is to comprehensively map the current situation in selected areas of inclusive education of children with special educational needs in kindergartens in the Czech Republic, i.e.: a) kindergarten teachers' attitudes to inclusive education; b) the conditions for inclusive education; c) methods and forms of work leading to inclusive education. To define the problematic areas of inclusion of pre-school children with special educational needs in the Czech Republic, to familiarise the professionals with them in the Czech Republic (as well as abroad), and then at least within the Institution of Primary and Pre-primary Education of UHK to respond to them by conceptual modification of the undergraduate curriculum of kindergarten teachers in both the bachelor's and master's form of study.

3. Research Questions and Research Methods

The aim of the research is:

- to map kindergarten teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education for children with SEN;
- to describe the risks of inclusive education of children with SEN in terms of kindergarten teachers;
- to map the current situation in the use of methods and forms of work aimed at inclusive education in kindergartens in the Czech Republic;
- to map previous experience of kindergarten teachers in relation to the integration of children with SEN.

To answer research questions:

- Does positive attitude towards inclusion of children with SEN prevail among kindergarten teachers?
- Is there a statistically significant association between respondents' experience with integration of children with SEN into kindergartens and their relationship to the inclusion of children with SEN into kindergartens?
- Do kindergarten teachers consider the lack of preparation of the teacher (i.e. low knowledge of methods and procedures for working in inclusive settings) as the most serious (most frequently mentioned) barrier to inclusion of children with special educational needs into mainstream kindergartens?
The questionnaire, which is the main methodological tool of this research, should lead kindergarten teachers to self-reflection in relation to the method of education of pre-school children. Specifically, in the answers to questions such as: am I able/unable to identify the specific needs of each child and respond to them with appropriate pedagogical approaches and strategies?; Am I able/unable to co-operate with the management of kindergarten, colleagues, parents and the wider public?; Can I prepare a plan or longer-term strategy for education of heterogeneous classes (groups) of children in kindergarten?; Am I able to analyse the learning processes of pre-school children and change teaching strategies, if they show to be ineffective?; Do I manage to compile an individual educational plan for the education of pre-school children with SEN?; Can I formulate my expectations that relate to the benefits of pre-school education for each pre-school child?; Can I be flexible, creative and concise in an educational situation?; Will I be forced to change "something" /or "what"/ in my next educational practices and strategies? (Hájková, Strnadová, 2010)

The research survey uses quantitative research methods with qualitative elements (note: a mixed research design). From the methodological point of view, questionnaire methods and observation methods are used.

A questionnaire survey is conducted in the period of May-July 2013. Kindergartens across the Czech Republic were addressed within the survey. Research respondents are kindergarten teachers.

The questionnaire used for data collection is anonymous. Self identification of the respondents is made only on the basis of regions, where a kindergarten is located. Factual nature data is determined by semi-closed and closed questionnaire items. The opinions of kindergarten teachers are also mapped through scales - scale responses.

An observation sheet is used to specify and complement the current situation in the field of inclusive education of children with SEN. Within the observations, mainly forms and work methods applied in kindergartens supporting inclusive education trend (note: direct, participant observation) are evaluated.

After the completion of the research survey, standard methods used to quantify the results of educational research will be used to evaluate the data.

4. Findings

Due to the fact that data collection using questionnaire method as well as the observation method are currently being implemented in kindergartens in the Czech Republic, it is possible to present only partial outputs of this survey. The presented information is based mainly on an analysis of data gathered within the initial pilot study, followed by questionnaire responses received so far and so far realised observation. The results of the research survey cannot be generalised at this time. However, the responses obtained by analysing the first 100 responses/questionnaires within the research can be considered relevant in relation to the issue.

In relation to the attitudes of kindergarten teachers towards inclusive education, on the base of the answers to the questions below it can be stated that teachers have rather neutral attitude towards the inclusion of children with SEN into kindergartens in the Czech Republic.

✓ Am I able to identify the specific needs of each child and to respond to them with appropriate pedagogical approaches and strategies?

| I am not able | I am more unable than able | My skills/competencies are average | I'm more able than unable | I am able |
|--------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------|
| 4 respondents| 16 respondents            | 47 respondents                    | 28 respondents          | 5 respondents |
| ∑ 100        |                           |                                   |                         |            |
Am I able to co-operate with the management of kindergartens, colleagues, parents and the wider public?

|                        | I am not able | I am more unable than able | My skills/competencies are average | I'm more able than unable | I am able |
|------------------------|---------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------|
| 0 respondent           | 3 respondents | 37 respondents            | 43 respondents                    | 17 respondents           |           |
| **Σ 100**              |               |                           |                                   |                          |           |

Can I prepare a plan or longer-term strategy for education of heterogeneous classes (groups) of children in kindergarten?

|                        | I am not able | I am more unable than able | My skills/competencies are average | I'm more able than unable | I am able |
|------------------------|---------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------|
| 2 respondents          | 14 respondents | 63 respondents            | 14 respondents                    | 7 respondents            |           |
| **Σ 100**              |               |                           |                                   |                          |           |

Am I able to analyse the learning processes of pre-school children and change teaching strategies, if they show to be ineffective?

|                        | I am not able | I am more unable than able | My skills/competencies are average | I'm more able than unable | I am able |
|------------------------|---------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------|
| 1 respondent           | 28 respondents | 29 respondents            | 23 respondents                    | 19 respondents           |           |
| **Σ 100**              |               |                           |                                   |                          |           |

Do I manage to compile an individual educational plan for education of pre-school children with SEN?

|                        | I am not able | I am more unable than able | My skills/competencies are average | I'm more able than unable | I am able |
|------------------------|---------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------|
| 0 respondent           | 14 respondents | 63 respondents            | 14 respondents                    | 7 respondents            |           |
| **Σ 100**              |               |                           |                                   |                          |           |
Can I formulate my expectations that relate to the benefits of pre-school education for each pre-school child?

|                      | I am not able | I am more unable than able | My skills/competencies are average | I'm more able than unable | I am able |
|----------------------|--------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|----------|
| Respondents          | 6            | 27                        | 56                                | 8                        | 3        |

∑ 100

Can I be flexible, creative and concise in an educational situation?

|                      | I am not able | I am more unable than able | My skills/competencies are average | I'm more able than unable | I am able |
|----------------------|--------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|----------|
| Respondents          | 0            | 3                         | 24                                | 26                       | 47       |

∑ 100

Will I be forced to change "something" in my next educational practices and strategies?

|                      | I will be forced | Probably I will be forced | My skills/competencies are average in the area | Probably I will not be forced | I will not be forced |
|----------------------|------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------|
| Respondents          | 33               | 42                        | 19                                            | 5                             | 1                   |

∑ 100

In relation to ensuring the optimal conditions for inclusive education of pre-school children with SEN, the kindergarten teachers particularly point in a different extent (on a scale from 0-5) to the elimination of a large number of children in classrooms (94% of the respondents), as well as to the elimination of the problems associated with staffing for the inclusion, i.e. using teaching assistant jobs (91% of the respondents). Furthermore, they point to the need to eliminate the unpreparedness of kindergarten teachers in relation to the knowledge of the characteristics and needs of the children with SEN (82% of the respondents), as well as the low knowledge of methods and procedures for working in inclusive settings (79% of the respondents). Other problematic areas of the inclusion of pre-school children into kindergartens are seen in the lack of the financial resources for supportive measures (74% of the survey respondents/ kindergartens teachers) and lack of preparedness of the social environment/surroundings (intact children and their parents) to accept the children with SEN (64% of the respondents). Furthermore, the kindergarten teachers in 58% mention an obstacle to an inclusive pre-primary education of children with SEN in insufficient coverage of intervention of experts specialising in pre-school children with SEN, then they point to the continuing architectural barriers (40% of the respondents) and 19% mentioned reluctance of teachers to adopt changes which would the inclusion bring.

In relation to improvement of the quality of supportive measures in kindergartens, in relation to the promotion of inclusion the kindergarten teachers would welcome in particular ensuring an assistant teacher (92% of the respondents), methodological pro-inclusive education of teachers (86% of the respondents), supportive
methodological materials (84% of the respondents), improving intervention of the specialists specialising in children with SEN (75%), the possibility of supervision (67%), changes to legislation (53% of the respondents).

5. Conclusion

Based on the data obtained so far within this research related to the inclusion of pre-school children with special educational needs in the Czech Republic, it can be said that among kindergarten teachers there is mostly a neutral attitude towards the inclusion of children with SEN. Among other things, it also shows that kindergarten teachers in the Czech Republic cannot really define the difference between integration and inclusion of children with SEN. In relation to the problematic aspects of integration/inclusion of pre-school children with SEN, the survey respondents/kindergarten teachers most often point on large numbers of children in kindergarten classes, as well as they refer to problems in staffing for inclusion (note: they miss a teacher's assistant), lack of preparedness of teachers in kindergartens in relation to the knowledge of the characteristics and needs of the children with SEN, as well as the low knowledge of methods and procedures for working in inclusive settings. Other problematic areas of inclusion of pre-school children in kindergartens are seen in the lack of funding for supportive measures and unpreparedness of the social environment/surroundings (intact children and their parents) to the adoption of children with SEN. On the basis of the pilot study and initial data collection by questionnaire method, it is not possible to objectively/generally answer, whether there is a statistically significant association between the respondents' experience with the integration of children with SEN into kindergartens and their relationship to the inclusion of children with SEN into kindergartens. The detailed analysis of respondents' answers show that those respondents, who already have an experience with the integration of pre-school children with SEN, reported, inter alia, far fewer barriers to the inclusion of pre-school children with SEN and they are mostly positively inclined to it (note: 27 kindergarten teachers making up the research sample, i.e. 27% of the respondents, have the experience with the integration of children with SEN into kindergartens). In conclusion we can state that the outcomes of the research survey carried out in kindergartens basically correspond to the conclusions of the so-called Fast surveys 1/2010, which in relation to the inclusion of children/pupils with SEN were realised by the Institute for Information on Education of the Czech Republic in May 2010, with 400 selected kindergartens, primary and secondary schools in the country.

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