

Inclusive Education and Teachers' Self-evaluation in Czech Primary Schools

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Abstract

The aim of our research was to determine what conditions teachers create for their pupils in primary schools in education with regard to inclusion, and how they verbalize and evaluate these conditions themselves. Our objectives were to verify the Czech version of the Framework for self-evaluation of conditions of education 2007 questionnaire (modified version of the British original "Index for inclusion". The research applies mixed design (quantitative and qualitative approach). From the qualitative analysis, we obtained information about which criteria of the inclusion are evaluated as the best, worst, and the criteria among which the biggest differences exist. For the qualitative analysis, we obtained a set of arguments for the sub-criteria which justify their ratings and also an idea about how to improve the conditions for inclusion. The presented results show the complexity of the current process of the transformation of Czech schools with respect to implementing the ideas of inclusion in the real life of schools and the differences among schools.

Introduction

The results of the research presented in this paper are part of the extended research project titled "Special Needs of Pupils in the Context of the Framework Educational Programme for Basic Education", implemented at Masaryk University, Brno. In this project we sought to find out whether the Czech educational system is ready to implement and support inclusive education in general, what conditions and requirements are defined by the State towards inclusive education, and whether schools are ready to accept and provide support to all pupils. To be able to answer these questions we formulated the basic objectives resulting in the overall design of the empirical research for a six-year period from 2007 to 2013. These were as follows: content analysis of the school curricula of sampled schools and content analysis of educational legislation which defines the requirements for inclusion, teachers' evaluation of the conditions for inclusion of education in the real life of schools, team observations of expert teachers in action with an emphasis on the education of pupils with special educational needs, creating a simpler tool for monitoring the conditions of education supporting inclusion and its verification and evaluation, and second team observation of the conditions for inclusion of education in the real life of schools summarized in the data obtained (in Kratochvílová, Havel, 2009, 2012; Kratochvílová, Havel, Filová, H. 2011). In this paper we focus on the results gained from the second and third phase of the research.

Theoretical Framework

The concepts of inclusion and integration are widely debated issues across many countries and their use is considered according to their meaning. "A few countries do not use the term 'inclusion' but use alternatives such as 'school for all' (Sweden) 'attention to diversity' (Spain) and 'differentiation' (Denmark). Countries are also at different points in moving on from the use of the term 'integration'." (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (2011a, p. 58). As Ainscow says "experience has taught us that there are many different views of inclusion" (Ainscow 2006, p. 14).

Generally the concept of inclusion in various political, conceptual and strategic documents is preferable to integration, which greatly reflects a change in thinking and providing support to pupils (UNESCO, 1994; United Nations, 2006, OECD 2007). Complexity is apparent in the terminology of typology of six different ways of thinking about inclusion (Ainscow, 2006), which influence the educational system of each country. The debate about inclusion has broadened in recent years from one which used to focus on the relocation of children described as having special educational needs to mainstream schools, to one which seeks to provide high quality education for diverse school populations (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education 2011b, p. 8).

While inclusion, in relation to student, means part of the local community from the beginning - "a part from the start" - , integration means that the aim is to integrate the pupil back into mainstream education, because at some point they had been earmarked (Watkins, 2009, p. 81). Inclusion is now understood as a human rights issue that concerns a wider range of learners than those with special educational needs (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (2011b)). The Czech educational system is also on its way towards inclusion. Since the early 1990s, the Czech educational system has gone through many changes which were a response to the evolving requirements of the newly established democratic society. Czech schools have entered the idea of autonomy in legal, economic and educational areas. Changes have been enshrined in many legislative documents, in particular through the main document - **Act No. 561/2004 Coll. Preschool, basic, secondary, higher vocational and other education (Education Act)**, in which education is officially based on the principles of equal access for every citizen.

Educational autonomy was supported by the statutory definition of the so-called two-level curriculum. The curriculum at national level in primary education introduced the Framework Educational Programme for Basic Education, which is compulsory, and also the starting point for the development of school curricula and schools can be profiled according to their current conditions, visions and objectives by them. On the one hand it allowed selectivity of basic education - in mainstream schools classes were set up with extended education concentrated on a certain area of education (languages, mathematics, computing, sports classes, etc.), and classes for the gifted, while on the other hand many schools recognized that it is better to create a suitable environment for the education of all pupils in their community and began to openly report their education philosophy as the idea "School for All" (see approaches to inclusion Ainscow 2006). Many schools defined their vision in the school curriculum as becoming a school for all.

When we talk about inclusion, we mean its wider and processual conception. In defining this concept, we perceive it as an on-going process aimed at offering quality education for all while respecting diversity and the different needs and abilities, characteristics and learning expectations of the students and communities, eliminating all forms of discrimination (UNESCO-IBE, 2008; Obiakor & 2012). We combine this concept with another concept - the quality of student life (see also components of quality – the cognitive development of the learner and the role of education in promoting values and attitudes of responsible citizenship and/or creative and emotional development in the UNESCO *Policy Guidelines on Inclusion in Education* 2009). We look at inclusive education as a process of integrating all children in regular schools in such a way that the staff of schools create in collaboration with the community such conditions that support their development in all areas of the quality of a pupil's life (somatic health, psychological, social, spiritual development and self-development) to the maximum extent.

We accept four characteristic features of inclusion from Ainscow (2005, p. 118-119):

- Inclusion is a process. That is to say, inclusion has to be seen as a never-ending search to find better ways of responding to diversity.
- Inclusion is concerned with the identification and removal of barriers. Consequently, it involves collecting, collating and evaluating information from a wide variety of sources in order to plan for improvements in policy and practice.
- Inclusion is about the presence, participation and achievement of all students.
- Inclusion involves a particular emphasis on those groups of learners who may be at risk of marginalisation, exclusion or underachievement.

In line with the view that inclusion and quality are related (UNESCO, 2009) we started out in our research approach with the complex concept of quality schools, which includes the areas of inputs and conditions, the educational process and the outcomes /model inputs-process-outcomes/ (SPILKOVÁ 2005, p. 75., Diton in Janik et al, p. 16-17; CAF, 2007). The model inputs-process-outcomes offers us a study of inclusion in schools in all its three components. For the research of inclusion today various tools exist , such as the *Index for Inclusion* (Booth & Ainscow, 2002) or *Achievement and Inclusion in Schools* (Black-Hawkins, Florian & Rouse, 2007) as well as national indicators or systems developed for the self-evaluation of schools (Department of Education, Northern Ireland, 2010). In accordance with the typology of different ways of thinking about inclusion (Ainscow 2006) and the vision of schools "to become a school for all" when we were considering a research tool for self-inclusion of schools we chose the Czech version of the questionnaire for index inclusion.

Indicators in the questionnaire cover the competences of teachers that are necessary for inclusive education (Feyerer et al, 2006) and the key principles of inclusive education, including the overarching principle of expanding participation in order to provide greater opportunity for the education of all students (Agency for Development in Special Needs Education 2011a).

Research Methodology

The Director of the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education Cor Meijer stated, “We can discuss inclusion on many levels: the conceptual level, the policy level, the normative or research level, but in the end it is the teacher who has to cope with a variety of students in the classroom!...” (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education 2011a). So it is very important to know how teachers approach inclusion in practice, and how they are able to assess and think about it.

The goal of this phase of the research was to determine what conditions teachers create for their pupils in primary schools in education in terms of inclusion and how they evaluate these conditions themselves and verbalize them. We used both quantitative and qualitative approaches for finding answers to these questions. As a research tool we used the Czech version of the *Framework for self-evaluation of conditions of education 2007* questionnaire modified from the British original “Index for inclusion” (Booth, T. & Ainscow, M. 2002). The original version of the questionnaire included a total of 45 criteria for evaluation. Each criterion was followed by a so-called “guidance question” (479 in total). The Czech version of 2002 was modified under the leadership of Pavla Polechová, included 42 criteria and the “guidance questions” were greatly reduced to 195.

For our research sample we chose almost 60 teachers from eight schools. It was a deliberate choice in which we focused on equitable representation of rural and urban schools. The urban schools are mostly *fully organized*. They accommodate between *217 and 649 students*. The number of *teachers* is between *16 and 41*. Of the rural schools there was one fully organized and three schools were listed as *small schools*. The number of pupils is between *45 and 165 pupils*. The social and cultural background of the children is much more homogeneous than in contemporary urban schools in general.

Due to the nature of the research tool it was possible to get **quantitative** data (level of expression by degree) and **qualitative** data (content analysis of arguments for sub-criteria) which are very important for evaluating the objectivity of the chosen degree. For this reason the results of the research are interpreted quantitatively according to chosen aspects closely tied to the results of the qualitative investigation. Our aim was to capture, if possible, all aspects that led the educational staff to the specific classification or argumentation. From the quantitative analysis, we obtained information concerning which criteria of inclusion are evaluated as the best and the worst, and the criteria among which there are the biggest differences. From the qualitative analysis, we obtained a set of arguments for the sub-criteria which justify the respondents’ ratings and also an idea about how to improve the conditions for inclusion. We found out that among schools there are large differences in the evaluation of the terms of inclusion.

All the possible views which we analysed are presented in the same order as they were formed and some of them have also been partially published (Havel, Filová, Kratochvílová 2009; Havel, Kratochvílová 2009; Havel, Filová, Kratochvílová 2010a, 2010b).

In this paper we briefly present some findings about the criteria of inclusion; in particular the criteria that teachers evaluated as the best and worst.

Findings

Five of the best evaluated criteria in our sample are:

The school tries to accept all pupils from the catchment area (average 7):

In this criterion the maximum value for all schools is at grade 7, which is not in accordance with the information included in the given item: “*Wheelchair access is a part of our plan for improving the school building...* ”; “*...physically disabled pupils have not been interested in our school yet. If that happened, they would be sent to a school ... that is designed as barrier-free*”. Although the teachers excuse this situation by the attitudes of the municipal council (they don’t have enough money, it is not yet up to date...), the maximum value in criterion B 1.2 should not be indicated.

Only two schools aspire to the maximum value of this criterion for similar reasons. According to the arguments, it is obvious that not all schools “can” be a school for all in the broad sense. However, this should correspond with their self-evaluation.

The school tries to minimize any discriminatory practices and acts of discrimination (average 6.7):

From the arguments we can see that they do not correspond with teachers’ self-evaluation either; they are not specific enough: “*School is more than trying to eliminate discrimination of any form. The school has experts in the prevention of socially pathological phenomena*”; “*We are working on eliminating stereotypes experienced*”; “*The school tries to minimize any form of discrimination...*”

All forms of support of optimal development of the child are consistent (average 6.6):

The arguments in this next best evaluated criterion are not usually adequate. Answers such as “Yes” do not tell us anything about the situation. As an acceptable one, we can include the following: “*year leadership, consultation of all teachers in the classroom*”; “*Every teacher is actively involved in finding ways to help the child with barriers in learning. They share experiences and the results of their observations of the child together.*” “*The class teacher transmits information about pupils to other teachers.*”

Working with pupils with SEN is based on inclusive principles (average 6.6):

Teachers recognize that they cannot approach pupils with special educational needs with the same “template”. But the inclusive principles presented by schools almost miss the moment when the methods and forms of this education would be used for example for improving the experiences of all pupils or at least as prevention.

All new pupils are helped to feel comfortable and safe at school (average 6.6):

The arguments show that schools have a relatively well-developed system of introduction and adaptation of new pupils. To a large extent they used “*social and communicative games to pull in a new child into the group either in a class or group work.*” Conversely unique, but very interesting, is a system when “*each new pupil has a mentor.*” It is also pleasant that some schools (despite the apparent satisfaction with the level of this criterion) declare their decision to “*develop a comprehensive programme for new pupils.*”

At first glance, it is clear that among the best evaluated criteria dominate those which are focused on applying the principles of maximum participation into the creation and development of an inclusive environment in school. Can it be said that our schools are well prepared to educate a broad spectrum of children with special educational needs or that the principles of inclusion are often treated superficially, because it should be like that? Or is education already quite alright? The answer will not be so easy. The acquired knowledge is necessary to be clarified by other research tools – for example observation of conditions of inclusion in the education of elementary schools.

Five criteria rated as the lowest (average):

Does the school consult with organizations which bring together people with handicaps regarding how the school should provide wheelchair access? (average 5.1):

This criterion shows the highest dispersion of values. We cannot accept such an argument as: “*In school, there is no need to provide wheelchair access at the present time*”. We think that schools must act in advance about the possibility of providing wheelchair access, especially with the foundation of a new school.

Access to homework contributes to the learning of all pupils (average 5.3):

This item is one of the worst evaluated items throughout the questionnaire, although in some schools the idea of voluntary and a choice of homework is clearly promoted. Sometimes pupils are allowed to choose which task to work on, so homework can consist of more practice or else detecting new information. Generally it is evident that in Czech schools there is unusual differentiation and individualization of homework. Homework is filled in by pupils at home in most schools. Most homework is achievable without the help of parents. However, two schools declare that *pupils have opportunities to do homework in after-school clubs*. This is especially a benefit for pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.

Assessment contributes to the achievements of all pupils (average 5.4):

In all monitored schools, teachers focus on the evaluation of pupils’ knowledge and skills and on authentication of the development of their key competencies.

They systematically lead pupils towards self-evaluation or evaluation of group work. In some schools, the mutually complementary system of the teacher's evaluation and pupils' self-evaluation is also evident.

Self-evaluation is often implemented not only verbally and randomly but also in written form and in the system of gaining regular information about pupils' views about their own results, the learning process and the causes of success or failure. However, this does not correspond to all schools as this item is among those with the highest variance.

We can evaluate as very adequate arguments such as: *“Pupils regularly evaluate not only the results of their activities, but also the learning process and the causes of success or failure.”* *“Regularly used self-evaluation of pupils allows them to reflect their knowledge, skills, and level of key competencies. At the end of group work we perform evaluations (writing - a questionnaire, or oral).”* *“Information books are based on weekly and monthly self-evaluation.”*

Pupils work together during the lesson (average 5.5):

This item is closely related to social and personal competence defined in the state curriculum. From the statements it is clear that teachers pay great attention to the cooperation of pupils in the classroom and in the school. The statements are much more specific: activities that are based on cooperation, mutual assistance and respecting the rules of communication in joint activities as well as their presentation are mentioned. It is also necessary to note that there are significant differences in the argumentation of schools.

School staff produce or make available sources (materials) to support the learning and active participation of all pupils, teachers and parents (average 5.5):

There is an exchange of materials between teachers and mutual enrichment in many schools. We can find differences in various ways to enable resources to parents and pupils. From these arguments, the diversity of teaching approaches and strategies which teachers implement in the realization of education supporting inclusion is obvious. These can all be an inspiration for teachers in their own self-reflection related to the question: How do I (teacher) contribute to the idea of “School for All” in my class, i.e. schools with friendly faces?

The above examples show how difficult it is to assess the sub-criteria of inclusion and support them by appropriate arguments. It requires an understanding of the whole issue of inclusive schools and a careful consideration of the situation in school. If there is no comparison among schools, their statements are very different in terms of degree of subjectivity.

Generally, we can say:

- a) That big differences were found in the **self-evaluation** of school - at the quantitative evaluation of indicators – the average school evaluated that the best was 6.7; the lowest degree by self-evaluation was 4.7.
- b) All referred schools in the quantitative assessment of criteria self-evaluate rather high on the scale. In 44% of cases schools are self-evaluated in the submitted criteria by a **maximal degree** of 7; 28% degree 6 and 17% degree 5. The other grades 4, 3, 2, 1 occupy an almost insignificant percentage. This may mean that schools create excellent conditions for inclusion or simply overestimate themselves.
- c) High values are also seen in the other measures of central tendency - median and mode. The mode value is 7 in five schools. The mode is most frequently grade 7 (in 60% of criteria), grade 6 (in 32.5% of criteria) and grade 5 (in 7.5% of indicators). The median is value 7 in four schools, value 6 in three schools and value 5 in one school.
- d) In the quantitative evaluation of schools, there are not such great differences in the sub-criteria. The difference is usually one or two degrees at most. In the qualitative assessment of responses to additional questions to the criteria there are great differences among schools.
- e) The teams of teachers often used answers for their argumentation that were too wide, general and unspecified or did not respond to the question suggesting a misunderstanding of the criterion of inclusion and lack of preparedness of teachers on both the theoretical and practical level for integrative pedagogy.
- f) One school was significantly different by its specific and factual argumentation. This school also excelled in the content analysis of the school curriculum.

Conclusion

The presented results show the complexity of the current process of transformation of Czech schools with respect to implementing ideas of inclusion in the real life of schools and the differences among schools. An inclusive spirit is placing new demands on schools that are trying to educate different groups of pupils.

For a better perception of the **issue of inclusive environment**, teachers from the monitored schools were familiarized with the research results and received a set of arguments for the sub-criteria. The researchers also worked with teachers within workshops which were used to recognize the environment, school conditions and exchange of experiences about teaching strategies in these types of schools. The research described above was followed by structured observations in the participating schools. Based on the research results, we tried to propose a much simpler form of the questionnaire which would correspond to the Czech environment.

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