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Application of individualization and differentiation in Czech primary schools – one of the characteristic features of inclusion

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Abstract

In this paper we carry out a qualitative and quantitative analysis of data obtained according to five selected criteria relating to individualisation and differentiation in teaching in Czech primary schools. As a research tool we used the Czech version of the questionnaire Framework for Self-Evaluation of Conditions of Education 2007 (modified version “Index for inclusion”). For each aspect mentioned above, we firstly chose the criteria selected from all three parts of the questionnaire. After this step we did a clear quantitative evaluation of individual criteria and then we commented on the obtained values with examples from a qualitative analysis of teachers’ argumentation.

Keywords: Primary school; inclusion; individualization; differentiation.

1. Introduction

Education supporting inclusion requires a stimulating and friendly school environment, based mainly on mutual respect among staff and pupils and appropriate methods of communication between them. At the same time, it aims at developing the inner potential of each pupil and at supporting integration into the social environment in the classroom as well as ensuring a safe climate. We also added a focus on analysing the obtained data through research to the above mentioned aspects of inclusion, with the following aim: to determine what conditions teachers create for their pupils in primary education from the point of view of inclusion and how they evaluate and verbalize these conditions themselves.

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2. Theoretical framework

The concepts of inclusion and integration are widely debated issues across many countries and the use of these terms varies and is gradually changing in theory, practice and in legislative documents. While inclusion, in relation to pupils, means to be part of the local community from the beginning "a part from the start", integration means that the goal is to integrate the pupil back into mainstream school, because at some point he/she had been excluded from it (Watkins, 2009, p. 81).

When we talk about inclusion, we mean its wider and progressive 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 & al., 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 define inclusive education as a process of integrating all children into regular schools in such a way that 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 (physical well-being /somatic health/, psychological, social, spiritual development and self-development) to a maximum extent.

The Czech educational system is also on the path to inclusion. Czech schools have gained legal, economic and educational autonomy. Some schools define the vision “school for all” in their school curriculum.

We accept the features of differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2005) and realize that a necessary condition of inclusion is the application of differentiation and individualization in education ensuring that all pupils can learn optimally and can achieve their maximum potential through their differences.

The starting point of individualization and differentiation is the diagnostic activity of the teacher in the classroom leading to a definition of the learning objectives (according to the individual). The teacher tries to achieve these objectives in cooperation with pupils through the educational content at a specific time and by using selected teaching strategies and appropriate evaluation of teaching. We can differentiate education in terms of content, timing, methodology and organization (Tomlinson, 2005).

3. Research methodology

In order to analyse the aspects mentioned above we used both a quantitative and a qualitative approach. In accordance with the typology of different ways of thinking about inclusion (Ainscow, 2006) and a vision for the school "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 Index for inclusion questionnaire. Indicators in the questionnaire cover the competences of teachers that are necessary for inclusive education and the key principles of inclusive education, including the overarching principle of expanding participation in order to provide greater opportunity for education of all students (Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2011).

Teachers evaluated each criterion on a seven-point scale (1 - not at all, 7 - totally). Their evaluation was to be argument-based and also had to describe the means to improve the conditions of inclusive education.

The survey involved almost 60 teachers from eight schools. It was a deliberate choice in which we focused on equal representation of rural and urban schools. After the general quantitative analysis (Kratochvílová, Havel, & Filová, 2009, 2011, 2012), we set the goal: to further analyse the basic principles of inclusion in schools necessary for an inclusive environment. A principle is understood as a fundamental tenet, thought, rule and guiding idea for negotiations (Dictionary of Standard Czech, 2005; Dictionary of Foreign Words, 1996). The principles of inclusive education are also named in strategic and policy documents (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education; Ainscow et al., 2006).

We define the basic principles of inclusive schools as follows:
a) **Communication** - how much schools ensure the conditions for inclusive education depends on communication among all members of the community to which education relates.

b) **Cooperation** - one of the features of inclusive schools is cooperation at all levels: cooperation between pupils, cooperation between educational staff, cooperation between school management and other workers, and cooperation with the external environment, especially with professionals who assist during integration of children with special educational needs in the schools and classes. Cooperation with parents is also important.

c) **Application of differentiation and individualization in education** - ensures that all pupils can learn optimally and can achieve their maximum despite their differences. The starting point of individualization and differentiation is the diagnostic activity of a teacher in the classroom leading to a definition of the learning objectives (according to the individual). The teacher tries to achieve these objectives in cooperation with pupils through the educational content at a specific time and by using selected teaching strategies and appropriate evaluation of teaching. A teacher can differentiate education in terms of content, timing, methodology and organization.

d) **Maximum expectation from pupils** - it is necessary that each pupil is perceived as a person and that teachers work sensitively with statements when they express their expectations towards a child.

e) **Respect** among pupils and school staff - respect is generally unconditional acceptance of each individual. In an inclusive school respect is required at all possible levels.

During the next stage of the research we focussed on the description of the five aspects of inclusion in schools. For each category mentioned above, firstly we chose the criteria (by content analysis) selected from all three parts of the questionnaire Framework for Self-Evaluation of Conditions of Education that described them (adapted from the Index for inclusion, Booth & Ainscow, 2002). After this step we carried out a clear quantitative evaluation of individual criteria and then we commented on the values obtained with examples from a qualitative analysis of teachers’ argumentation.

In terms of the scope in this paper we presented one of the principles of an inclusive school – individualization and differentiation.

### 4.10 Findings

For a detailed analysis of individualization and differentiation, we have chosen the following criteria:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of item</th>
<th>Criterion</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A 2.5</td>
<td>Staff seek to remove barriers to learning and participation in all aspects of the school</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C 1.1</td>
<td>Education respects the diversity of pupils</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B 2.4</td>
<td>Way of identification and evaluation of SEN is used to reduce the barriers to learning and active participation of all pupils</td>
<td>5.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C 1.6</td>
<td>Assessment contributes to the achievements of all pupils</td>
<td>5.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C 1.11</td>
<td>The access to homework contributes to the learning of all pupils</td>
<td>5.29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Staff seek to remove barriers to learning and participation in all aspects of the school

The relatively high values (average is 6), which individual schools attributed to this indicator imply that schools are aware of their professional mission. According to the humanistic concept of education they derive their force from the diagnostic activity of the teacher which is the starting point of his/her influence on children. One school says that the difficulties in learning of a large number of pupils represent feedback
for the class teacher for evaluation of their work and reflection on it (professional self-reflection). Teachers carry out the diagnostic work with a view to integrating children with special needs among others. Subsequently, they reflect and look for ways for these children to create optimal conditions for education. Only marginally, it can be deduced from other comments that schools pay attention to monitoring the personal development of a pupil as evidence of his/her success, which is a sign of an informal approach to individualizing education in terms of inclusive schools.

Education respects the diversity of pupils

Despite the high average 6, it is clear that the arguments regarding this item were often general or did not apply to a given indicator. More specific statements appeared in one school that lessons include activities that can be done individually, in pairs, groups and with the whole class. During lessons there are various activities including discussion, interpretation, writing, drawing, problem solving, use of the library, audio-visual technology, practical activities and information technology. Education is mostly supported by methods in which students experiment, discuss and learn from each other. An important attribute is the choice (order of tasks, individually, in groups, use of tools and techniques) and consideration of the individual pace of students. Pupils learn to record their work in different ways, from which they can choose the best one: common notes, mental map, audio recording for children with dysgraphia etc. Two schools stated that pupils are supported in the best activities for them by differential task assignment. In line with current trends they declare the general support of gifted pupils.

Way of identification and evaluation of SEN is used to reduce the barriers to learning and active participation of all pupils

Also in this indicator, it seems that schools can cope. This is illustrated by the relatively high average value 5.7. Monitored schools state they create individual education plans based on pupil testing in the pedagogical-psychological counselling centre or special-pedagogical centre. It should be noted that the source of a well-prepared plan should also include parents, members of involved educational staff as well as pupils, if possible. Created in this way it will be a useful document supporting the development of pupils. On the other hand, considerable variance of values attributed to this indicator suggests that some schools are aware of some weaknesses in this area and are still looking for ways in which to best create an individual programme.

Assessment contributes to the achievements of all pupils

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 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, it does not correspond to all schools as this item is among those with the highest variance.

The access to homework contributes to the learning of all pupils

This item is one of the worst evaluated items throughout the questionnaire, although in some schools the idea of voluntary and 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. 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 the after-school clubs. This is especially a benefit for pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.
5. Conclusion

The inclusive spirit is placing new demands on schools that are trying to educate different groups of pupils. Among the arguments of schools are substantial differences related to their degree of specificity. Some schools justify the evaluation of the criteria with very specific arguments which demonstrate their real life, which is occasionally missing in some schools and their criteria.

The weakness is unsystematic use of pupil self-assessment, formative evaluation function and the use of different teaching strategies to support differentiation. Teachers, however, declare an interest in this area of education and are able to cooperate with parents and many experts in this area.

The above examples show how difficult it is to find suitable arguments for the chosen criteria. It requires an understanding of the whole issue of inclusive schools and a very careful consideration of the situation in schools. If there is no comparison between schools, their statements are very different in terms of degree of subjectivity. That is why schools received a set of arguments with the sub-criteria gained in the research.

At the same time it is necessary to ask whether the chosen research tool is suitable for our environment. During our research we pointed out the difficulties teachers met during its implementation into practice. The cardinal problems were particularly time-consuming processing of the questionnaire and the fact that some sub-criteria were less understandable. For the above reasons, we decided to reduce the questionnaire of 2007, including: revision of the number of criteria for evaluation of the conditions of inclusion - an overall “slimming” and revision of the guidance questions; increased clarity of some criteria and indicators by text reformulation; transfer of criteria among the three main groups of the research tool; maintaining a seven-point scale, but integrating the requirement for evaluation of each indicator (before guidance questions) and graphic editing of the research tool. Based on the research results, we tried to propose a much simpler form of the questionnaire, which would correspond to the Czech environment and consist of criteria for principles of inclusion mentioned above (more in Kratochvilová, Havel, 2012).

References