

Classroom Climate in Schools with Hearing Impaired Pupils

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*Pupils with hearing impairment and their position in the
classroom team of inclusive schools
Czech Republic*

Abstract

Inclusive education is one of the most debated topics in the field of special education. The inclusion of pupils with special education needs in mainstream schools can bring many types of difficulties - pupils with a hearing impairment may experience a communication barrier. The hearing impairment itself affects their speech and comprehension. For deaf pupils who use Czech sign language and must use an interpreter to communicate with others is the communication barrier significantly exacerbated. With the communication barrier also comes the social barrier and the exclusion of the pupil from the class collective.

The author of the text has already dealt with the topic of inclusion in the past and has extended the research for primary schools in the Czech Republic. The aim of the research will be to describe the position of pupils with hearing impairment in the school collective and the characteristics of their social roles. The issue itself will be investigated by means of a questionnaire survey (aimed at pedagogical staff), classroom observations, interviews with parents and teachers of pupils. Special methods focused on the school (classroom) climate will also be used - for example, SO-RA-D (Sociometric Rating Method). The outcome of the research investigation is the creation of a material on the issue of education of pupils with hearing impairment, which will include suggestions for classroom work and the inclusion of the pupil into the classroom team.

Keywords: communication barrier, hearing impairment, inclusive education, school climate, social barrier, social role

1. Introduction

Inclusive education for pupils with special educational needs has been legislated in the Czech Republic since 2015, which clarifies its actual implementation in practice. Pupils with different types of special educational needs are educated in schools according to their individual education plan

and with varying degrees of support. The form of education for different groups of pupils depends on their type of disability, competences, and abilities. The issue of those with a hearing impairment will be addressed in more detail in this text.

2. Education of pupils with hearing impairment

With regards to the education of a student with a hearing impairment, parents can choose between two educational pathways - placing their child in inclusive education or in schools for the hearing impaired.

The number of such schools in the Czech Republic is 13. Their list is as follows: Prague - Ječná, Prague - Výmluva, Prague - Holečkova, Pilsen, České Budějovice, Hradec Králově, Valašské Meziříčí, Brno, Olomouc, Ostrava, Liberec, Ivančice and Kyjov. Most of these schools currently educate those with hearing impairment, but also pupils with impaired communication skills, and pupils with combined disabilities (autism, mental/physical/visual impairment) are also placed in schools [1].

Schools for children, pupils and students with hearing impairments offer education with the participation of special education professionals - i.e., special educators, social workers, and even Czech sign language interpreters. In schools the pupils also often encounter hearing and deaf teachers, in which case we speak of bilingual education - the combination of these teachers provides instructions in both Czech and Czech sign language. Moreover, their cooperation brings the culture of the majority society and the Deaf community into the teaching. Schools specializing in the education of pupils with hearing impairment use special methods, textbooks and aids, and the compulsory length of study is also different. Compulsory attendance in the Czech Republic is 9 years, however, in special schools one year is usually added - this is used as a preparatory year, or the first year's curriculum is spread over two years. Some schools use this extra year towards the end of primary education, so that the last year is used to repeat and consolidate what has been learned [2].

2.1. Legislation and support measures

As already mentioned, inclusive education legislation implementation begins in the spring of 2015. This year, the Education Act (Act No. 561/2004 Coll.) is being amended. Section 16 of the Act deals with support for the education of children, pupils and students with special educational needs. These needs are individual for each pupil according to their abilities and skills [3].

To achieve maximum potential in education and to ensure equality of education for all pupils, each pupil is placed in a level of support - there are five in total in our education system. The first level is provided by the school itself, the pupil is educated according to an educational support plan, from the second level onwards there is cooperation with school educational institutions (their activities are governed by Decree No. 197/2016 Coll.), with the help of which an individual educational plan is created. A specific feature of the third level is the assignment of an additional worker - in this case a teaching assistant. This assistant is usually with the pupil throughout the school day or is assigned to many pupils in different classes and supports each pupil in the most important subjects (mathematics, language teaching) [4].

Since schools also educate pupils with a different communication system (in our case this would be Czech sign language), who are included in the fourth level of support, a Czech sign language interpreter is usually present in schools. The communication systems of deaf and deaf-blind persons are dealt with in our legal system by Act No 384/2008 Coll. This Act not only provides a list of communication systems suitable for this group of persons, but it also ensures them the right to be educated in this communication system throughout their lives [5].

The location of the classroom itself can also be a supportive measure across the levels - ideally the classroom should be in a quieter part of the school, away from a noisy street that might interfere with listening comprehension of the pupil with hearing loss. Where the pupil is seated in the classroom is also important. Ideally, desks should be set up in a U-shape to give the pupil a better view of what is happening in the classroom as it is very important for those who read lips as an important part of speech understanding. If this is not possible it is a good idea for the pupil to sit in the first (or second) desk. For a pupil who has an assistant, he/she sits in the desk. If the pupil does not have an assistant, a classmate who is socially able and has good grades sit next to the pupil - this can motivate the pupil, repeat things if they have not heard them, or even alert the teacher that the pupil needs more support. In teaching, it is necessary to check understanding of the material and to emphasize demonstration.

In addition, listening exercises must be eliminated from teaching of Czech and all other languages. When

teaching PE (including swimming and skiing), it is often necessary to take off the compensatory aid - therefore it is advisable to know the principles of communication with people with hearing impairment - speak calmly, do not turn your back, do not hide your lips behind your hands and keep a maximum distance of 4 meters [6].

3. School climate

In describing the educational environment of the classroom, we distinguish between physical and psychosocial factors. Physical factors are the lighting of the classroom, the color of the walls, the construction and placement of the furniture - all of which influence the process of learning. Psychosocial factors are further subdivided into variables and more stable factors. Variable is the atmosphere in the classroom = short-term states and the interaction between the participants in the education. More stable is the classroom climate = the social relations between the participants in education.

The classroom climate can be defined as the sum of subjective evaluations and self-assessments of the experiences, emotions and interactions of individual participants that occur in the context of educational and other activities in a given environment (i.e., the classroom environment). The co-creators of this climate are the students, teachers, and parents themselves. Their cooperation and collaboration in solving problems is the key to creating an appropriate climate [7].

The classroom climate should be regularly assessed and reviewed. The results should be reflected in teaching methods and classroom work - pupils, as an important part of the classroom climate, should be involved in changes, and teachers should be given professional development opportunities in classroom work and the climate of the collective. Developing positive relationships between classmates and teachers can take the form of classroom lessons or team activities. In the case of the inclusion of a new pupil, it is also advisable to choose adaptation camps so that all pupils can get to know each other and form relationships together [8].

3.1. Methods aimed at classroom climate

Many methods can be used when we are focusing on the classroom climate. In the Czech educational environment, the SO-RA-D, the B-3/B-4 questionnaires, or the Classroom Climate Method are widely used methods.

SO-RA-D (Sociometric Rating Method) is created by Hrabal and deals with the formation of groups and relationships between students. Respondents rate each other according to the influence and the sympathy/antipathy they feel for others; they also give verbal ratings to individual classmates. The result then

tends to be a hierarchy of influences and relationships between individual classmates. When using Braun's B-3 and B-4 questionnaires, respondents choose their three closest friends and three with whom they do not count for interaction - a finding that again points to a hierarchy of relationships in the classroom collective.

Mareš and Ježek are the authors of a method called School Classroom Climate. This questionnaire uses a five-point scale (1 - disagree to 5 - agree) to rate statements relating to the areas of - cooperation and good relations with classmates, teacher support and equality, competition between pupils, the conduct of breaks, etc. Thus, the results do not only indicate the relations in the classroom collective, but also evaluate the teacher, his objectivity and work with the class. This questionnaire makes it possible to work better with the collective and to point out areas that need to be addressed and improved [9].

4. Author's research

As outlined above, the author has been working on the issue of inclusive education during her master's studies and has continued her research during her doctoral studies.

4.1. Inclusive education of pupils with hearing impairment

The first research focused on the education of pupils with hearing impairment in the South Bohemia region of the Czech Republic. The aim was to find out how inclusive education takes place in practice and whether the hearing impairment affects the communication and social skills of the pupil.

Three pupils with hearing impairment, their teachers and parents (mothers) participated in the investigation. The pupils were - a girl in the seventh grade (compensated by hearing aids), a boy in the fifth grade (compensated by hearing aids) and a girl in the first grade (compensated by hearing aids and a cochlear implant). The research used a combination of research methods - observation of the school day in mainstream schools, interviews with parents and teachers of pupils with hearing impairment and a questionnaire survey focusing on the teaching staff and their views on inclusive education.

As a result of this research, it was found that none of the pupils' communication skills were affected by their hearing impairment - all pupils grow up in hearing families and are educated with hearing peers from pre-school.

Social interaction already varied quite a bit from pupil to pupil, with the youngest pupil being sought out by other classmates and she was also engaging in interactions within the classroom. The two older pupils were not as involved in the collective - the seventh-grade pupil was minimally involved and others did not seek contact with her, the boy had a

close friend, but he had minimal interaction with other classmates in class and during breaks. This finding was also supported by interviews with parents - both Mothers of older pupils described them as sensitive and shy. In addition, both of these pupils were diagnosed later in their lives - the oldest girl at the age of five, the boy only in first grade (i.e., at the age of six). This may also have influenced the fact that even earlier in their childhood, they kept more closely to their parents and family and were not used to engaging in activities with more children - as they were less able to understand them, and this may now have carried over into their later life and social interactions within the classroom collective [10].

4.2. Position of hearing impaired in their classroom collective

The ongoing research will focus on inclusive education throughout the Czech Republic and will take a closer look at the position of pupils with hearing impairments in the hierarchy of classroom relationships. Unfortunately, from previous findings, it appears to us that pupils with hearing impairment may be marginalized, some even talking about the so-called exclusion phenomenon. In this case, however, it is necessary to find out whether the pupil is bothered by the role of outsider or is happy without interaction and does not seek it out in the collective of the classroom. Therefore, the research of the dissertation (entitled Inclusive Education of Pupils with Hearing Impairment and their Position in the Classroom Collective) aims to find out what the climate of the classroom (or even school) collective looks like when a pupil with a hearing impairment is placed in it. It will also be important to characterize the social roles that this pupil occupies.

Methodologically, interviews with teachers and parents of the pupils, classroom observations and a questionnaire survey will again be used to reach the teaching staff. In addition, special methods focusing on the climate of the classroom collective will be used, e.g., Our school, or SO-RA-D, which will result in the determination of the influence of individual pupils and how likeable they are to others.

The outcome of the ongoing research will not only be the findings based on the research itself, as part of the data collection the author would also like to create a manual suitable for teachers who work with pupils with hearing impairment. This will consist of an introduction to the whole problematic of hearing impairment, the principles of communication and the differences in education for individual pupils according to their degree and type of impairment. This will be supplemented by information obtained in the research on what the real problems are in practice and how to work with them, and what to avoid in school.

5. Conclusion

Inclusive education of pupils with special educational needs is an important trend in the field of Special Education. However, ensuring sufficient and appropriate support measures and acceptance of the pupil by the collective is sometimes problematic. In addition, in the case of hearing impairment, a communication barrier may be present, which in turn causes the emergence of a social barrier. Therefore, it is important for the teacher and the school management to reflect the climate of the classroom collective, or the climate of the whole school, so that individual pupils feel themselves as full members, supported and understood not only by their classmates but also by the teachers.

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6. References

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