

Possibilities of individual integration of a child suffering from Asperger's syndrome into the regular Basic School

Jarmila Kadláčková

Abstract: *This report is about the possibility of individual integration process of a child suffering from Asperger's syndrome into regular Basic School. It depicts the integration process of a child suffering from AS in the conditions of a regular Basic School and the causes of physic load perceived by a child suffering from AS.*

Key words: *Asperger's syndrome, individual integration, assistant pedagogue, Individual teaching programme, visualization, structured learning, method of process schemes, physic load, educational strategy*

1 Theme and goal of the diploma thesis

As for the topic, the present work deals with possibilities of individual integration of a child suffering from Asperger's syndrome (AS) into the regular Primary School. The principle and general goal of the thesis is twofold: examination of individual integration of a child suffering from AS in bulk as a process in setting of the regular Basic School, and understanding of this phenomenon as based on previous expert knowledge. One reason to undertake this research is also the fact that expert literature dealing with the present issues aims mainly at the description of AS diagnosis, rather than at ways of education or integration into the regular Basic School.

The basic research question, which I set at the beginning of the research, was the following: How is the process of integration of a child suffering from AS realized in conditions of a regular Basic School? This question is followed by further research questions, which appeared during the research proper and added to the main one. Among them: How does the adaptation of a child suffering from AS to a regular Basic School proceed? What are possible causes of mental strain perceived by a child suffering from AS?

The expected contribution of the thesis is believed to bring about more information on description and comprehension of specifics of the process of integration of a child suffering from AS at Basic School, occasionally also finding of further possible areas of the present topics, appropriate for future investigation.

2 Research sample

As follows from the topic and the goal of the thesis the research sample represents one selected child, integrated individually to a regular Basic School, whom AS syndrome was diagnosed. During the school year 2011/2012 when the research took place the child attended the 5th grade of the Basic School. My first step to start the research activities was to address the regular Basic School in which the child suffering from AS studied. Having received the positive answer over the phone, I asked the class teacher for help; she had had the child integrated in her class for three years already. From the point of view of a complex approach to data finding I included into the research sample, from the very beginning, further significant factors of integration: assistant pedagogue, remedial teacher, and the child's parents, who after expressing their consent were incorporated into the research, too.

3 Case Interpretation

Problem development

As his mother told me, Johnny had problems as early as in his preschool age. When he was 3 and a half years old, problems with his speech fluency began, and he has been in care of a speech therapist since. Due to this fact he attended a special kindergarten for children suffering from speech impediments; he is said to have got on well together with other children then. Yet as early as that time Johnny's mother was aware of some of his atypical manifestations: for example, he was unable to detect emotions from mimics and facial expression of a person, and very seldom he looked at other people when talking. Also very conspicuous was his overall clumsiness: it took him long to learn to ride a bike and skate. In this connection his mother mentioned also his problems in self-care, saying that Johnny was slow and careless to dress himself. The boy is also supervised by the pedagogical-psychological advisory center because of his inferior speech performance. This is why experts suggested that he started his school attendance later. On recommendation of Special Pedagogical Centre the boy was integrated into a special logopaedic class of Basic School. As his mother said, Johnny had difficulties to acclimatize himself in class.

Difficulties appeared during the first three months of his first grade: he got tired easily, he could not concentrate in the learning process. His mother worked with him

on preparation to classes for two to three hours a day in order that he could manage school requirements at all. When he was 7 years old, the complex neurological examination confirmed the AS diagnosis in the end. As there was no continuation of the logopaedic class in a prospective second grade, the mother in cooperation with the Pedagogical-Psychological Centre and the Special Pedagogical Centre discussed Johnny's change to a convenient Basic School. She was recommended that Johnny would attend a practical Basic School (special school with modified curriculum), but she refused admitting that as far as possible she would prefer for Johnny to go to a regular Basic School in his domicile, which also his brother had attended. Evidently enough, she wants to "keep" the boy in the regular Basic School.

AS and adaptation to the environment of regular Basic School

As mentioned above, Johnny was integrated to the regular Basic School for four years, and currently, namely in the school-year 2011/2012, he attends the 5th grade. As his class teacher confirmed, all subjects are run in the regular class. The boy works according to his individual education plan, which is prescribed by the so-called School Education Program, in Czech, English, and Mathematics. Because of the boy's AS diagnosis a vacancy was opened for the post of assistant pedagogue. A specific approach concerns also the system of assessment: in the subjects of Czech, English and Maths the report is produced in verbal evaluation instead of marks. The boy has his favourite subjects, too, which have something to do with his specific interests.

4 Discussing results

In the present part of this chapter I would like to offer a complex overview of the problems examined, namely, the interrelation of the research outcomes with the theoretical knowledge. At the beginning of the integration the first important step for its successful progress was the mother's approach: it was during the first class meeting when she informed other parents about the situation, namely, about her child's defect and her wish to place the boy in the regular class, and she also asked for tolerance. The class teacher's approach, too, was significant, in the way that she adequately informed other pupils in class about possible manifestations of the integrated boy's behaviour, and she asked for tolerance. Thus the two approaches made good grounds for establishing a high-quality class team of children who were able to understand the needs of a pupil suffering from AS.

As followed from the research, during the adaptation phase, which is under examination, Johnny fought with burden situations. The mental burden, which is also mentioned in expert literature, is caused by changes in daily activities. As shown in the teacher's attestation, the school is prepared, following the recommended methods,

to prevent the phenomenon. The excellent example in Basic School practice is a stable, unchangeable schedule of lessons for the period of several years, which is good for a pupil suffering from AS, as well as for the rest of the class, and the endeavour of the school management not to change the class teacher of the integrated pupil. As the present research shows, the mental load is represented also by work-loads, or demands of teaching process in the regular Basic School. With Johnny it is in classes of Czech, English and Mathematics, in which he has to work with more effort in order to master them. In our case, the integrated pupil suffering from AS is able to stand the common work-loads of the Basic School under the following conditions. Regarding his or her diagnosis, the pupil is ensured an individual, personal approach, namely by an assistant pedagogue, and also in terms of the Individual Teaching Program, which concerns mainly problem subjects, such as Czech, English and Mathematics, in which his or her results are evaluated verbally rather than in marks. Based on previous specialist examinations, i. e. neurological, psychological, and pedagogical ones, as well as on the observations of teachers and mother's information, the Individual Teaching Program as conceived for Johnny comprised specificities of his needs: namely, what is important for the development in the social area is the drill in scenarios of socialization. As there is barely enough time at the regular Basic School to meet these demands, the teachers say, the practical training is provided in lessons of composition. As for the AS diagnosis, the methods recommended to master the teaching goals are those of visualisation, structured learning, and the method of process schemes. In practice, when making concrete teaching aids, such as number axes or survey cards, we find it convenient if the teacher works together with the assistant pedagogue.

The research has shown that the teaching process of the integrated pupil is influenced also by other factors, such as problems of fatigue and weakened attention, problems of text comprehension, and the pupil's slow tempo in work proper. The practice has shown that successful solution of these difficulties is conditioned by cooperation of all factors of integration: for example, as for the reduction of fatigue problem and weakened attention the neurologist suggested that Ritalin should be given to favour the medication. Having good experience with afternoon preparation the boy's mother agreed with the cure, and that is why the assistant pedagogue is allowed to give the pupil Ritalin during classes and thus eliminate fatigue troubles. As far as the problems of text comprehension are concerned, the good system in practice is the pupil's independent work with a dictionary: he can look up the meaning of an unknown word in class on his own, without disturbing his mates. Concerning the compensation of the pupil's slow rate of work, his teacher in cooperation with his mother agreed on the following system: as the pupil wishes to enjoy the feeling of success and tries to hand over the worked-out assignment in time together with his class-mates, he has the same tasks as others yet in reduced number. For instance,

in lessons of Czech two complex sentences only, whereas his class-mates have five sentences. The remaining sentences are trained at home with mother's help.

Another mental load is the sensitivity of the pupil suffering from AS to his being different from other class-mates. This fact is confirmed by his teacher and the assistant pedagogue. The analysis has shown that in consequence of this intensive feeling on the pupil's part a strong need has developed with him, namely to make up the difference. This is an important piece of knowledge for his teachers from the point of view of creation of educational strategy. In concrete terms it means to modify special approaches for the pupil so that he could accept them in the collective of his mates. Besides others, it is the above-mentioned stable time-table for the whole class instead of a visualised daily program, the system of identical tasks for everybody, yet in a reduced number for the pupil suffering from AS (this should be consequently compensated by a more intensive home preparation under his mother's supervision), more cooperative methods of work during classes instead of independent work.

One of interesting parts of the research was the finding how the pupil tries to come to terms with those exacting situations. Johnny seems to fight for his good social position in his collective, he wants to achieve the same results in class as other mates do, which is really a positive side. The analysis has confirmed that his efforts to catch up with others is not conditioned by his mother's wish only but by his striving, his ambition. On the other hand, it follows from the analysis, too, that Johnny perceives as carriers of differences also other tasks, books, which primarily has much to do with integration, modifications and methods. As a result of this secondarily the pupil reveals negative reactions, namely refusal, irritation. If the teacher is aware of reasons of these reactions, he or she can prevent these situations, look for possibilities how to meet the pupil's needs in other ways: for example, he or she can set the pupil a smaller number of tasks and thus make it possible for him to hand over the worked-out assignment together with his mates and, simultaneously, to enjoy the feeling of success.

Searching for an answer to the question "How does the integration process of a child suffering from AS run in the conditions of a regular Basic School?" one of the central categories of the whole integration process came to the fore: namely, the parental need of the pupil's mother, which is included in her attitude to education and to school as such. She considers education to be very important and valuable for her child's future. From this perspective, what she understands currently as the crucial point is for her child suffering from AS to keep on attending the regular Basic School; in such a way she believes to ensure her son better starting conditions for future, in case he went on studying or took a job. This is what motivates her to be at pains during daily, several hours lasting preparations of her son to school. She is convinced that in this way manifestations of the defect are being kept down. Another significant central category is the ability of the pupil's teacher to give him a hand in

classes, to treat him as equal as others, namely as those without the AS, which showed through the educational approach: the pupil is set the same assignments as others are. The important central category, which is active in the integration process, is the pupil's need to level up differences with his classmates. It shows that each of these factors of integration has different needs in the integration process. However, during the analysis it was very interesting to observe how these categories of needs influence each other, how they co-determine and co-qualify successfulness of the whole integration process. Practice verifies the fact that what can be developed as an inherent component of these mechanisms is also so-called inclusive category. The example may be the same tasks to work on by all the class, or the above-mentioned stable schedule of lessons lasting for several years, which serves to the whole collective of the class, and which makes it possible for the pupil suffering from AS to foresee the structure. It means that every pupil enjoys the possibility of getting what he or she really needs.

To conclude this part of the chapter, I would like to mention further areas which could possibly be explored in future. Owing to the fact that the present part of the research deals with the pupil's integration into the regular Basic School, namely the first part of Primary School, it would be a good idea to follow the integration process as this will proceed in a longer spell of time, say, in the higher form of Primary School, possibly also in the Secondary School, further on to assess barriers or stimuli of the whole process, conditions, the pupil's motivation for integration, and the key factors of integration. What can also be an apt topic, appropriate one to explore is a comparative treatise based on two or more case studies dealing with the present issues.

Jarmila Kadláčková
Na Odpoledni 15
750 02 Přerov
Czech Republic
e-mail: j.kadlackova@centrum.cz