

Inclusive education – its social and ethical aspect

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Abstract: *Inclusive education of children with special educational needs, conditioned by health or social disadvantage, was again the topic of political parties in their election rivalry. The election programs of political opponents agree in that respect that special schools are the anachronism and the brake of personal and social development of students. The paper will focus on motives of such an attitude and will concentrate on some ethical issues of integrated education of hearing-impaired children and youth. We will rely on our several-year research and consulting practice.*

Keywords: *Inclusive education, hearing impairment, academic competencies, social inclusion*

1 Introduction

When more than twenty years ago integrated education started to be implemented in our schools along with democratic changes in our society, it was generally accepted as the essential humanization element of the education system. However, after the initial enthusiasm the political will to economically secure its efficient operation soon faded away. Thus, the education of health-disadvantaged children in mainstream schools progressed coincidentally in practice and it achieved a different quality (Zborteková, 2004). The biggest problem became the weak professional skillfulness of teachers, the lack of personnel and material support (the lack of special school teachers and aids, also the zero salary valuation of teachers). However, the legislation gradually improved.

2 Attitudes of society

Today, the term “integration” was completely replaced by the term “inclusion”, but without paying regard to fulfilling its content, as the Casablanca Congress defined in 1994. The remodeling of the majority society’s attitude towards persons with special needs, which does not require assimilation from part of the minority anymore but is rather alone willing to adjust to the minority’s special needs and to respect its diversity, has been going slowly and is bumping into economic limitations.

Simultaneously, in times of the economic crisis and the pre-election fight a political interest sprang to life in Slovakia with focus on the issue of integrated education for children with special educational needs. In the program declaration of the outgoing government and in electoral programs of political parties, without a clear justification based on verified facts, it is stated that “*it is necessary to promote the gradual integration in mainstream schools*” (SDKÚ – Slovak Democratic and Christian Union), because “*special schools have a substantially adverse impact on lives of many children*” (KDH – Christian Democratic Movement). The SAS (Freedom and Solidarity) party openly says that “*special schools are too expensive and the quality of their education is lower.*” The situation, according to its leaders, could solve the “*increase of the normatives imposed on the integrated pupil*”, which is presently already three times higher than in the normal pupil. This tempts many schools to recruit a higher number of pupils with special educational needs without knowing how to provide professional care for them, since the use of the normative is not systematically controlled. The economic liberals have a real vision how to efface the segregation of pupils with special educational needs and pupils from socially dependent communities as follows: “*to provide standard education in mainstream schools to which professional workers from pedagogical and psychological counseling centers will move.*”

Is then the integrated or inclusive education the only correct way to help children with special needs to develop their potential and to succeed on the labor market at times of high unemployment? Or is there any *sine qua non* behind the interest in minorities to limit public spendings?

3 Research results

In our research and counseling practice we pay a long-term attention to the issue of integrated education of hearing-impaired children and adolescents. We will therefore briefly summarize what this type of education brings to the deaf and what the dissolution of special schools would mean to them.

The indicators of successfulness of school integration can be considered to be the achieved academic competencies and the level of social inclusion. Our researches, which were focused on cognitive and social-emotional development of moderate-

severely and severely hearing-impaired pupils in integrated education in mainstream primary and secondary schools, have repeatedly confirmed the effect of positive developmental changes primarily in the area of the development of verbal abilities (Chart 1, 2). We can infer from this that the mainstream school environment in which the hearing-impaired children were educated by the oral method only and the education in family influence the development of speech in such a measure that in the period of secondary-school studies they reached the values in the range of the population mean.

On Chart 2 you can see that the most significant changes occurred in the range and in the ability to use the general knowledge, in the development of conceptual speech thinking, in vocabulary, and in the ability to comprehend the spoken and written language, and in the orientation in routine life situations.

Chart 1: Comparison of mean values of verbal IQ, performance IQ, and total IQ of hearing-impaired pupils on the basis of age (N=81).

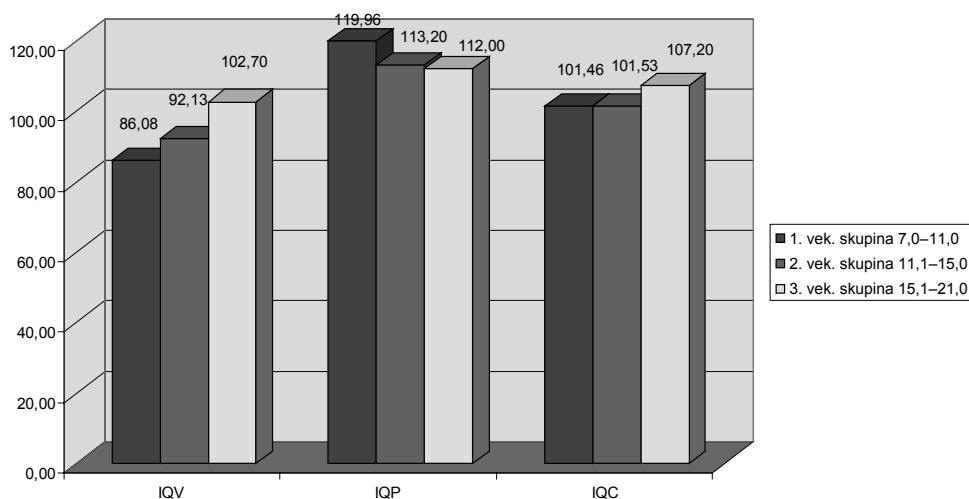
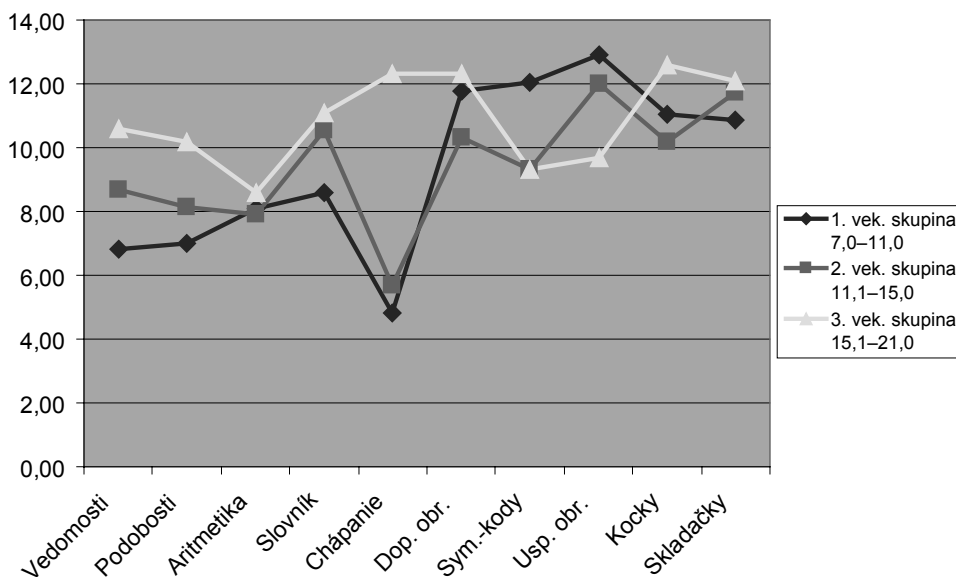


Chart 2: The mean values of weighted scores in the profiles of individual subtests of Wechsler Scales (Information, Similarities, Arithmetic, Vocabulary, Comprehension, Picture Completion, Coding, Picture Arrangement, Block Design, Object Assembly) – the comparison of three age groups of hearing-impaired pupils.



In the socio-emotional area we noticed, in the respondents that we followed up, the higher occurrence of introvert orientation (63.33%). Pupils of primary schools showed their unwillingness to adapt to the changes, they manifested a good formal adaptability, very good observation abilities, sensitivity, a high need for recognition and self-realization, a desire for new experiences, and internal insecurity. In the secondary-school students we diagnosed a high occurrence of anxiety, lower emotional differentiation, adjustment difficulties, signs of depressive experiencing, feelings of insufficient emotional saturation, a desire for love, happiness, fun, and joy.

The risk of the long-term strain, which the integrated education for hearing-impaired children surely involves, will be relieved quite well by the functioning family background at younger age. The period of adolescence can be difficult for the deaf in that sense that they are forced to accept, in addition to demanding training, also their own distinction, which complicates the inappropriate social status and insufficient social acknowledgment of one's own value from part of the hearing peers.

In addition to acquiring new knowledge, during the school attendance children form, in natural peer interactions, their social competencies which are important for establishing and maintaining social relationships. Social inclusion of hearing-

impaired pupils in integrated education is a serious problem that does not receive the adequate attention from part of parents and teachers. In six schools, in which we conducted the research focused on the social status of deaf pupils in the class collective, we found that only in exceptional cases they had the appropriate position. Most of them were on the margin of their classmates' interest, within the scope of sociometry they received low ratings, they did not have any decision-making part in activities in their classroom. We witnessed ignorance, passivity, misunderstandings, rejections, underestimating, loneliness, and also bullying of deaf children in mainstream schools. They failed to defend themselves and could not speak about their experiences.

In our counseling practice we meet with a large group of hearing-impaired children who, despite their several-year stay in the hearing environment of a mainstream school, do not progress in their cognitive development, are stagnating, or their performance declines. Usually, in the child's medical history also health problems or behavioral disorders are present – this is how the child responds to its long-term stress. After the child is transferred into the special school, a refinement of these symptoms comes to pass after a certain time; however, teachers signal gaps and deficiencies in the acquired curriculum that cannot be easily caught up with.

From the above-mentioned research and empirical findings it is clear that the comparison of statistical means, behind which are hidden distinct interindividual differences, cannot be completely sufficient in cognizance of the multifaceted reality. The qualitative and case-study analyses help us, too, achieve the more truthful and complex picture of the benefits of inclusive education for children with severe health disadvantage.

4 Conclusion

It cannot be denied that integrated education has a humanistic intent – to provide equivalent education to health-disadvantaged children without being separated from their families, and simultaneously to form the prosocial and empathic behavior of intact children. They have the same goal as special schools – to prepare children for life. However, they do this in a different manner and, obviously, not always perfectly. Both forms of education cover the children's needs and have a good reason for their existence. Those special ones offer a refuge to those who, for various reasons, are unable to successfully withstand the requirements of regular schools and unable to experience joy from cognizance and from fellowship with peers. Therefore, not even a bad economic situation should be the reason to limit the rights of the child and its parents to decide on the appropriate way of education, even if this would take place on behalf of the noble idea to eliminate the segregation. Pragmatic and insensitive political decisions may harm those who are the most vulnerable.

5 Literature

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