

Impact of teaching assistants on children's adaptation to the school environment

(scientific paper)

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Abstract: *The paper deals with children's adaptation to the school environment in the context of the impact of teaching assistants and school club lecturers from the perspective of headteachers and employees of selected schools in the Olomouc Region. The research was carried out under the following project: 'Inclusive education for the Olomouc Region' (Ref. No. CZ.02.3.61/0.0/0.0/15_007/0000183) a part of which focused on children's adaptation to the school environment. The first section presents the theoretical information concerning adaptation, inclusive education, and the position of the teaching assistant; the second section focuses on the methodological survey aimed at headteachers, teachers and teaching assistants. The objective is to identify the impact of these specialized personnel, reflect on their work content, and describe the level of their involvement in the teaching process and their overall usefulness. In the conclusion section the authors emphasise that their role is indispensable for many schools and supports pro-inclusive tendencies in working with children with special educational needs and children from different socio-cultural environments. Being of an informative nature, the paper is intended not only for the lay public, but also for a wide range of students and professionals, mainly of a primary, special and social education background.*

Keywords: *adaptation, inclusion, teaching assistant*

1 Introduction

Adaptation of children with special educational needs (referred to as SEN) and children from socially disadvantaged or different socio-cultural environments is the core issue in the process of inclusion. Adaptation is considered a process of getting used to changes that people encounter in their current environment. As a result, these

people are subject to stressful situations that they need to react to. This is a lifelong process and children leaving preschool education and entering primary education need to handle a number of stimuli and cope with many changes, not only from an educational but also emotional perspective (homesickness, separation from the parents, accepting a new authority). As suggested by Vágnerová (2012), adaptation to the school environment requires the child's emotional maturity and experience. Therefore, it is not mere passive adaptation, but rather active participation in the changes in the specific life environment (Paulík, 2017, Vágnerová, 2012).

The purpose is to help children with SEN but also children from different socio-cultural environments to enrol in primary education (first grade of elementary school) by means of a targeted support educational programme. As was already mentioned in the context of adaptation, starting primary education is a big change not only in the life of the child, but also of the child's family. A successful start of the educational process is affected not only by the educational staff (teacher, assistant teacher, teaching assistant, after school club educator), but also the family and the environment in which the child grows up. Recently, a number of educational programmes have been proposed that should facilitate children's adaptation to the school environment. However, it very much depends on how these proposed programmes are implemented.

The fundamental aim of today's educational concept is to provide equal conditions for lifelong learning, which has the potential to transform our society into the so-called learning society. During the process of transformation of Czech education over the last thirty years, there have already been three waves of change:

1. Transformation of the concept of education from encyclopaedic learning to the development of required competences (after 1989),
2. Integration, as a result of which special schools were closed and replaced with open schools (in 2008 a total of 47.1 % of all children with health disability were integrated in mainstream schools),
3. Development and support of inclusive schools – current trend in Czech education (Provázková Stolinská, Rašková, Šmelová, 2016).

The third wave of the transformation of Czech education responds to the visions defined in Strategy for Education Policy until 2020 and is legally regulated by the amendment to the Education Act in the Czech Republic (1 September 2016) focusing on the application of inclusion in real school settings. As suggested by Pastieriková, Regec (in Šmelová, Souralová, Petrová et al., 2017) in the context of the global effort to implement inclusive education, there are two groups with opposing opinions (not only in the Czech Republic) – advocates of inclusion and advocates of special education. This fact also results from an insufficient preparation of the concept of inclusive education and the speed of its implementation

including insufficient staffing and funding (assistant teachers, teaching assistants, special education teachers, etc.) Following the amendment to the Education Act and the demand for professional support in the field of inclusive education, the Faculty of Education, Palacký University Olomouc started an initiative called Equal access to high-quality pre-primary, primary and secondary education and launched a project entitled 'Inclusive education for the Olomouc Region' (Ref. No. CZ.02.3.61/0.0/0.0/15_007/0000183), which is based on 6 key activities and its objective is to provide specialized staff (teaching assistants, inclusion coordinators and others), establish school counselling centres, develop a specialized methodological network, implement courses, and provide the necessary support to schools and teachers in the implementation of inclusive education, particularly in the context of educating children with SEN and socially disadvantaged children.

2 Process of children's adaptation to the school environment – inclusion in practice

The right to education is granted to every child, as defined by the fundamental human rights. In children with specific needs, the process of adaptation is even more noticeable and is closely associated with the so-called social inclusion, which means that a child, person or pupil with health disability is accepted by society with such disability. Inclusion means acceptance of diversity and it appears that the required conditions should be implemented already in preschool age, during which school maturity is decisive for inclusion of the child in subsequent educational paths (Finková, Langer et al., 2014). Education of children with SEN in a mainstream class is a fundamental right of every child in the process of inclusion (Opatřilová, Vítková, 2012). Inclusion is therefore a higher degree of integration (Požár in Lechta 2010) and requires preparation and a change of mind-set of the majority society, and a shift in the perception of the presence of persons with health disability, which essentially means that to be 'different' means to be normal.

Enrolment of a child in school and success of the process of integration and subsequent adaptation are affected by numerous factors, including the parents, environment, or social conditions. Inclusive tendencies are based on cooperation and a sense of belonging while minimising exclusion (Bartoňová, Vítková, 2012), i.e. 'exclusion of a person from usual social life and impossibility to be involved as a result of an unfavourable social situation' (Act No. 108/2006 Coll.) In this process, the central role is played by the parents, who are often distrustful of the institution, are referred to a counselling centre, have a higher degree of social uncertainty, etc. (Valenta et al., 2003). This can be prevented already at the very first contact with the school, during which the parents have an opportunity to learn about the educational staff, equipment of the school, and its overall accessibility, whether in terms of infrastructure

or barrier-free provisions (Michalík, 2001 in Šmelová, 2017). The situation can also be directly affected by the teachers. In foreign countries, inclusion in schools is supported primarily by assistant teachers, teaching assistants, or auxiliary teachers (Webster, Russell, Blatchford, 2015; Fox, 2009; Giangreco, Doyle, 2007; Groom, Rose, 2005). They provide support to children with a variety of special educational needs. Inclusion can only be effective if schools provide their educational staff and pupils with conditions favourable to an individual approach, openness, and overall development (Arnoldová, 2015). However, mutual cooperation is not successful in all cases. Sometimes parents believe that everybody learns to read and write in school. But only after their child starts to show problems or fall behind, the parents start to resolve the situation. It is therefore very important to inform not only the parents but also the lay public about the fact that if parents place their child in the educational process despite the child's immaturity diagnosed by a specialist, they cause their child's school failure to some extent. The consequences of this decision are then reflected in feelings of failure, lack of motivation for learning, emotional instability, and other educational problems (Fasnerová, 2018). The school therefore has the major role in the process of children's socialization, because this is the place where they spend most of their time in a certain period of their life. This is a specific social occasion which becomes an integral part of life. The negative consequences, which might be caused by various factors including family problems (children in alternating custody of divorced parents), organizational issues (difficult time management as a result of a demanding job and the need to prepare the child for school in the morning), and social pressure (parents' requirements, expectation from the child and the school as an institution, etc.) may have an effect on the child's emotional experiencing and increased anxiety and stress, which makes adaptability more difficult (Vágnerová, 2012; Langmeier, Krejčířová, 2006; Klégrová, 2003).

To outline the current situation concerning the above, the following tables show the numbers of children with special educational needs in the Olomouc Region. In 2017/2018, elementary schools in this region had a total of 6,669 children with special educational needs, of whom 5,129 were educated in mainstream elementary schools and 1,540 in elementary schools established under Section 16, Sub-section 9 of the Education Act (formerly known as special elementary schools).

Table 1 *Total number of children with SEN in elementary schools in the Olomouc Region (Bělíková, 2017)*

	Number of children	Of whom girls
Children with SEN	6,669	2,181
Health disability (Section 16, Sub-section 9 of the Education Act)	5,921	1,848
With another health disadvantage	912	394

Other *)	414	173
With extended length of education	94	33
With adjusted educational requirements	665	249

Table 2 *Children with SEN in mainstream elementary schools in the Olomouc Region in 2017/2018 (excluding schools established under Section 16, Sub-section 9 of the Education Act) (Běliková, 2017)*

	Number of children	Of whom girls
Children with SEN	5,129	1,620
Health disability (Section 16, Sub-section 9 of the Education Act)	4,398	1,291
With another health disadvantage	778	335
Other *)	303	135
With extended length of education	18	11
With adjusted educational requirements	276	99

*) *Children with SEN including children from different socio-cultural environments or other living conditions*

2.1 Effect of teaching assistants on the process of adaptation

One of the objectives of projects with pro-inclusive tendencies is to respond to the visions of school modernization. To insure a smooth process of inclusion, schools need various specialists including teachers, school psychologist and assistant teachers available for children with special educational needs. Assistant teachers represent one of the tools of inclusive education. Their role is to provide direct support to the teacher in working with children with SEN. Assistant teachers are educational staff, whose methodology and expertise is defined by numerous legislative regulations (Decree No. 27/2016 Coll. on education of children with special educational needs and talented children); this position is defined in the amendment to the Education Act No. 82/2015 Coll. As suggested by international studies, assistant positions are required in schools, but looking for example at assistant teachers or teaching assistants in the UK, they are mostly available to children with physical disability (Maher, 2016; Hemmingsson, Borell, Gustavsson, 2003). Regarding the necessity of the position and the amendment to the Education Act, one of the objectives of the present project was to establish a new specialized position identified as the teaching assistant in mainstream elementary schools.

The position of teaching assistants in the educational programme is defined as follows. Through play, teaching assistants develop children's visual, auditory and tactile perception at all levels (analysis-synthesis, differentiation, figure and background, memory and rhythm). This places requirements not only on the skills of the teacher

but also of the teaching assistant, as was already mentioned in the context of enrolment in the first grade. These skills include working with children's variability, initial diagnosis of perception in reading and writing, and also using children's motivation for learning, which has an effect on a number of activities (family background, attitude to reading, etc.) (Fasnerová in Šmelová, Souralová, Petrová et al., 2017). In the context of this programme, teaching assistants develop children's fine motor skills with a focus on graphomotor skills, muscle relaxation and a correct tripod grasp in order to avoid tension while using a writing utensil. The educational programme also includes games the objective of which is to include children in a group of other children of the same age and their socialization in the group. During these activities, children's communication skills and correct speaking habits are developed. Teaching assistants help with preparation for classes, arrangement of the workplace, organization of the day, provision of formative feedback to children, and children's motivation for learning. As suggested by Langmeier, Krejčířová (2006), this type of work should be as entertaining or serious as play, which is a reminder of the known motto 'school by play'. At the same time, one can speak of play, which is the school of life.

Teaching assistants are invaluable non-educational staff, whose role is irreplaceable also because they mediate communication between the family and the school and the non-profit sector concerning children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds; they also support children's regular attendance, extracurricular activities, etc. Generally, the position of teaching assistants (including assistant teachers) is considered beneficial, but also as a potential obstacle to children's activities ensuing from a close relationship and possible dependence on an adult person, detachment from classmates, or loss of personal control. The presence of an assistant often makes children seek help only from the assistant, not from the classmates or the teacher (Ainscow, 2000; Hemmingsson, Borell & Gustavsson, 2003; Feiler & Gibson 1999; Giangreco et al., 1997). Studies presenting the role of assistants (at all levels) emphasize their significant effect on inclusion of children with special educational needs in education in mainstream schools. Most of them present the results of case studies, which provide a description of qualities that affect the way of providing assistance. These studies conclude that an important aspect in providing efficient and flexible support to children with SEN is the significance of social meeting with peers (Maher, 2016 Webster, Russell, Blatchford, 2015; Fox, 2009; Giangreco, Doyle, 2007). For this reason, the research study verified the importance of the position of teaching assistants in elementary schools.

3 Methodology and research goals

The main research objective was to identify whether teaching assistants and school club lecturers were actively involved in the educational process in school (with re-

spect to their specified job content) and to identify their usefulness as seen by school headteachers.

Methods

Qualitative research methods were used, namely interviews with headteachers of selected school involved in the project, document analysis (work reports, activity reports), and analysis of ongoing reflexive activities.

The objective of the interviews was to analyse the work content of teaching assistants and school club lecturers; to analyse the degree of staff involvement in the educational process in the first stage of elementary schools and overall workload of teaching assistants for school purposes.

Additional data were obtained and processed according to qualitative analysis methodology and data processing principles (Juklová in Skutil, 2011) in line with the following structure:

STAGE 1: Text editing

STAGE 2: Segmentation

STAGE 3: Coding

STAGE 4: Categorization

STAGE 5: Structuring and interpretation

The sample

The research sample was recruited by means of deliberate sampling and included 11 headteachers of elementary schools involved in the project and having children with SEN and children from disadvantaged socio-cultural backgrounds, where the number of these children did not exceed 40% of all children and having the below specified staff employed as part of the project.

The following staff were employed as part of the project (key activity):

- Teaching assistants (different from assistant teachers), whose responsibility is to work in classes in the morning or afternoon, help children with organization of the day, preparation for classes, development of self-care activities, manipulation with new objects, and involvement in unknown activities as a result of the child not having attended pre-primary education and having been educated at home, often in a socially non-stimulating environment.
- 'First grader school club' lecturers, who work in afternoon school clubs for first graders in order to support smooth inclusion and adaptation of socially disadvantaged children in the group of classmates and in the after school club. Through play, the lecturers strengthen children's competences acquired during morning classes. This also involves deliberate socialization of selected children to facilitate their successful enrolment in education and to develop positive motivation. The

most frequent methods included individualized teaching, teaching in didactic units, critical thinking, project training, teaching with elements of drama education always respecting the children's interests and abilities, etc.

During the first few months of compulsory school attendance, attention was paid to the process of adaptation to the school environment (i.e. learning about the school conditions, observing the rules, meeting one's duties, etc.) At the same time, the staff were provided with practical methodology including examples, illustrations, etc. supporting children's adaptation and positive acceptance of the role of a schoolchild.

The activities of specialized staff are continuously monitored and evaluated throughout the period of the project. Teaching assistants have an opportunity to consult their work not only with the regional coordinator but also with elementary grade teachers. Another significant aspect is establishing cooperation with the family (in the context of the non-profit sector and the People in Need organization). The results of the present research study reflect the data obtained throughout the almost two-year activity of teaching assistants and one-year activity of school club lecturers in selected schools in the Olomouc Region.

Interpretation of Results

According to the project conditions, the research study involved a total of **11 teaching assistants** with various degrees of education – secondary school with school leaving qualification, completed assistant teacher course, higher vocational school, university. The average length of experience in education was 5 years. The average number of children with SEN taken care of by the teaching assistants was 10. The research involved a total of **8 first grader school club lecturers** whose opinions complemented the results.

The interviews involved a total of **11 headteachers** of selected schools.

The interviews with the headteachers suggested the following. All headteachers appreciated the teaching assistant position as part of the project. They used teaching assistants in various primary classes, although the main focus was on the first grade and children's adaptation in the group of classmates and especially in the educational process. After enrolment in the first grade, some children were unable to follow the procedures and organization as required by the school. In this area the teaching assistants were of great help. In the implementation of adaptation programmes, for which the assistants had been trained, it was revealed that some children were not sufficiently prepared for school in terms of social aspects, but particularly in terms of their knowledge and skills. In this area the teaching assistants helped not only in the morning classes but also assisted with home preparation during children's afternoon

stay in schools and after school clubs. The headteachers believe that the presence of the teaching assistant facilitated children's adaptation and inclusion in the group of classmates. Through play, the differences between children were overcome. Regarding the large number of different children in a class, the presence of the teaching assistant proved necessary in order to achieve successful inclusion of some children in the educational process. Teachers required an increase in the number of teaching assistants in the framework of the present project because the teaching assistants were trained in children's adaptation to the school environment and were an invaluable support. The teaching assistants also helped the teachers accompany children to various extracurricular events aimed at leisure activity development and provided support in administrative and organizational activities. The teaching assistants developed children's communication skills and through the adaptation programmes and play helped develop their vocabulary and correct speaking habits. As suggested by the headteachers, although the non-educational position of the assistants also included communication with the family and overcoming barriers between the family and the school, this happened rarely and this issue was mostly addressed in cooperation with the above mentioned non-profit organization, which has field employees trained in communication with problem families.

Regarding the school club lecturers, the headteachers were again very positive. The lecturers (mostly students of the Faculty of Education, Palacký University Olomouc) worked with selected children in after school clubs. They also focused on the adaptation of children from excluded socio-cultural environments and children with SEN in the group of schoolchildren through play and extracurricular and leisure activities. In the school clubs the lecturers also focused on tutoring children and on home preparation in order to minimize the workload in their families. Also in this area, the teachers through the headteachers appreciated the presence of the lecturers.

An analysis of documents and reflexive activities suggested the following conclusions presenting the opinions of the teaching assistants and school club lecturers about the real job content in the school environment. The following categorization is based primarily on the *vivo* codes generated during the process of document reflection ('coding').

Table 3 *Reflection on the impact of teaching assistants*

Categorization *	Note taking	Identification of the relationship between categories
Activity	• Presentation of the school building and classroom environment with the teacher and teaching assistant • Communication topics – effort to alleviate shyness in the new environment • Supervision assistance provided to first grade teacher – organization of rest time during breaks and clean-up of the workplace • Engagement of children with SEN in various activities and extension of activity time	Selection of basic but relevant activities supporting the adaptation of children in the first grade in the school environment
Time allocation	• During the day • Controlled activities and spontaneous activities • Individual activities	Avoidance of stereotypical activities within a single time frame
Purpose	• Individualization in working with children • Supporting children's adaptation to the school environment • Diagnosing children's skills	Wide range of applications
Procedures and risks	• Interiorization of usual activities (especially in children who are not independent) • Frequent alternation of activities • Required cooperation with the teacher (or other actors – school psychologist, special education teacher, school counsellors, etc.) • Occasional repetition of activities • Absence of task evaluation – entertainment • Development of portfolios of children with SEN in order for them to see their own products – motivation	Possible evaluation of interiorized activities – beneficial for children, their parents and teachers
Conditions	• Children in class with various dispositions, including children with SEN • Material and didactic aids commonly available in elementary schools • Special material and didactic aids • Natural unstructured material and didactic aids • Classroom environment – comfortable and natural, supportive climate • Environment outside the school building (school grounds) • Rhymes and songs • Imagination of movements using assimilation • Imitation	The teaching assistants managed to apply the knowledge contained in applicable methodology, regularly consulted the procedures and reflected on their effectiveness, and reacted to various situations in a natural and intuitive way.

Table 4 *Reflection on supporting education of children with SEN*

Categorization *	Note taking	Identification of the relationship between categories
Period of adaptation of children with SEN	Supporting the activities of teaching assistants (by providing an individualized approach) did not extend the adaptation period as per applicable standards (3–4 months)	A significant positive effect of teaching assistants in schools for the purposes of supporting an inclusive approach
Positive aspects of teaching assistants in school	- Supporting an individualized approach according to the needs of a child with SEN - Attractiveness of activities beyond the teacher's responsibilities - Working with the whole class (not only with one child with SEN) - Closer cooperation with parents and their participation in the child's adaptation to the school environment	The teaching assistants (and in their opinion also the teachers) consider the inclusive approach beneficial in supporting communication with the parents and effective socialization of all children attending their school
Negative aspects of teaching assistants in school	- A large number of children in class decreases or limits the possibility of an individualized approach - Limited time allocation - Increased amount of administrative activities (associated with project implementation, not teaching assistant activity)	The teaching assistants also mentioned some negative aspects of the inclusive approach but their opinions were dominated by positives for the school
Opportunities	- Development of heterogeneous classes - Supporting socialization and personalization in the real environment both for intact children and children with SEN	Elements supporting the application of an inclusive approach
Conditions, risks	- Individual or small group activities - Activities aimed at automation and respecting the classroom regime - Activities aimed at respecting the teacher's authority (and adults in general) - Activities aimed at separation from the family (social readiness for school) - Activities aimed at inclusion of children with SEN in the group of classmates - Repetition of activities to achieve successful interiorization - Being close to children when they need it - It is advisable to produce children's portfolios (motivation purposes) - Clear observance of work procedures – habits affect school performance - Respecting individual pace and providing individual care - Required cooperation of all parties involved	Necessary components that need to be observed for successful implementation of an inclusive approach

Table 5 *Education in informal first grader clubs*

Categorization *	Note taking
Activity and objectives	• Supporting trust and encouragement for work – feeling of safety • Increasing children's self-confidence • Children's feeling that a 'strange person' cares about them • Better marks and understanding of the learning content • Inspection of children's work • Assistance • Graphomotor training • Revision and fixation of school knowledge (especially mathematics and Czech language) • Walks in nature in order to revise basic humanities and natural science • Development of learning materials (especially worksheets) • Assistance with homework • Aesthetic, cognitive, working and social activities
Notes and recommendations	• Tolerating children's interest in learning throughout the week proved to be useful – didactic games on Monday and Wednesday (smaller interest in learning), worksheets and homework on Tuesday to Thursday • Activities were selected according to children's interest and current mood • Children need to acquire a sense of responsibility – each activity must be completed • It is crucial to win the parents' favour (general disregard for education, disregard for cooperation with the school, mutual parents' aversion, etc.)
Advantages of lecturer's activities for the children	• Personal approach • Individual care • Improvement of learning outcomes
Advantages for the school	• Help provided to teachers • Improvement of children's learning outcomes • Help provided to after school club leaders
Disadvantages for the school	• Administration • There were no other disadvantages – only advantages!

Table 6 *Reflection on educational programmes for the development of children's key competences and literacies*

Categorization *	Note taking	Identification of the relationship between categories
Activity and objectives	• Activities supporting motivation for learning • Activities supporting understanding and respect for differences • Activities aimed at elimination of prejudices and stereotypes • Activities supporting the development of communication skills – e.g. to facilitate interethnic dialogue • Activities aimed at open sharing of feelings, strengthening vocabulary • Activities aimed at strengthening respect for human rights and openness to other people • Activities aimed at the development of visual and auditory perception, gross and fine motor skills, graphomotor skills	Necessary components for children's adaptation to the school environment and supporting school achievement
Procedures and risks	• It is important to map each child's situation – their abilities, possibilities and cultural environment • It is important to work with all children (with the whole group) – not only individually with a child with SEN	Conditions for effective setting of socialization and personalization support in the real school environment with aspects of an inclusive approach
Purpose	• Understanding the importance of education • Preventing school failure	According to the teaching assistants, a great advantage is the possibility to consult professionals and other colleagues in order to make sure that their procedures are correct Understanding the complex importance of individual activities Great importance of the sequence of activities – often suggested as a new piece of information

The text below is based on the job content of a teaching assistant as defined by the Czech Ministry of Education (see Definition of the position of teaching assistants for the purposes of using this position within OP RDE approved by the managing board for inclusion of the MEYS CR as of 16 October 2015). The analysis of the impact of teaching assistants suggests that the mentioned structure of activities is used in the whole extent and has significant positive effects. Schools use the role of teaching assistants to ensure the following functions:

- Supporting direct non-educational approach to children and pupils;

- Supporting an individualized approach for the purposes of children's adaptation;
- Supporting children's socialization and personalization in the real school environment;
- Supporting children's (and parents') trust in the school;
- Supporting children's preparation for classes;
- Administrative and organizational support provided to the teacher;
- School-family cooperation mediator – this function is rather theoretical, schools and teaching assistants are interested but so far have limited experience.

4 Conclusion

In conclusion, the authors would like to mention some risks that emerged throughout the project. At some schools some teaching assistants and school club lecturers were replaced due to low financial compensation (FTE 0.5 in the project) and impossibility to cover the remaining part by the school or from other resources, which could have slightly affected the headteachers' assessment. It should also be noted that all teaching assistants and school club lecturers have had a very responsible approach to their work and understand their contribution for the school.

The results of the present research study carried out as part of the following project: *'Inclusive education for the Olomouc Region'* (Ref. No. CZ.02.3.61/0.0/0.0/15_007/0000183) and one of its key activities focusing on adaptation to the school environment with the help of teaching assistants as an essential prerequisite for school success suggest that the position of non-educational assistants is very desirable and indispensable, both from the perspective of headteachers and other staff. Positive relationships were developed between the school and the assistants, and between the assistants and teachers, which brought a positive effect on the inclusion of children with SEN or children from disadvantaged socio-cultural environments. All headteachers would appreciate the presence of teaching assistants and school club lecturers in the next school year. Regarding the fact that the position of a non-educational assistant proved to be indispensable to successful inclusive education in some schools, the headteachers seek for various resources to cover teaching assistants, possibly by means of follow-up projects under further OP RDE calls.

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