

Children with special educational needs in the context of artistically focused education of the Czech Republic

(scientific paper)

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Abstract: *This article reports on action research that is realized and financed in close association and with the support of European structural and investment funds and operational programme Research, Development and Education in the Czech Republic. The above mentioned research provides the methodological base of the survey focused on equal access to high-quality preschool, primary and secondary education, on fight against all forms of discrimination and enforcing equal opportunities as well as on the support of social integration and fight against poverty. Realization of these aims is the target of realized project IMUZA which is in progress in the Czech Republic between the years 2017–2020. This project is focused on the support of children, pupils and students with special educational needs in teaching artistic disciplines and in artistic education. It covers a wide network of elementary and secondary schools and vocational colleges. The aim of IMUZA project is the optimalization of work of current and also future “artistic” teachers in the context of their work with unique artistic production of children, pupils and students with special educational needs.*

Keywords: *action research, artistic disciplines, social integration, special educational needs*

1 Introduction

With the modification of school legislation which is in progress in the Czech Republic in the last decades, there have been significant positive changes in organizational conditions for common education of all students with special educational needs at schools of so called educational mainstream. The financing of aids for integrated pupils and students has got better, the number of supporting workers (especially school assistants) has increased and the accessibility of special pedagogical care as well as

the frequency of above-standard special pedagogical interventions has increased too. How has this situation reflected in relatively variable and complicated system of artistically focused schools in the Czech Republic? What are the attitudes and reflections of teachers of artistic subjects and also of children with special educational needs?

The answer to these questions should be given by the action research which has become the backbone and basis of collecting and evaluation of data of the IMUZA project.

2 The plan of action research and the outline of subsequent activities

The first and the basic task of the selected action research was to gain a representative sample of schools in the Czech Republic including all age categories of students attending these schools and including also all types of school that teach artistic disciplines (except universities). The category “artistic disciplines” included especially teaching music, art and dramatic education.

Schools meeting the basic criterion concerning the existence of teaching artistic subjects and teaching children and students with special educational needs have been electronically approached, the aim of IMUZA project was explained to them and they were also offered to participate in the project actively.

The design of so called action research has become the basic tool of the research. It was focused on identification of facilitators and obstacles of inclusive artistic education. Its realizers were not only the workers of a research team of IMUZA project but also teachers and other experts who use artistic tools in educational process participated in it. The framework of their research activity included cyclic, repeated search and setting factors that influence required changes leading to optimalization of the present state.

The main aim of the action research was to determine the most important facilitators and to identify the obstacles of inclusive education of artistic subjects at above mentioned types of schools.

The plan of the action research included following phases:

1. summary (evaluation and reflection) of their own experience;
2. identification (classification and description) of a potentially solved problem;
3. suggestion of possible solutions – processes;
4. practical performance of a process – intervention (with data collection);
5. evaluation (analysis and interpretation of data);
6. adjustment of an action plan with respect to ascertained results.

Furthermore it was set that necessary changes will subsequently be derived from current needs of research practice, at the same time it was supposed to monitor personal, social, material and intervention factors (the most important facilitators and obstacles). From the methodological point of view it was a mixed type of research and triangulation of methods that included:

- selection of a research sample: it was an intentional selection according to an institutional key
- data collection: the data were gained using the work with focus groups and they were stored in the form of verbatim forms (transcription of communication in terms of focus groups)
- analysis and interpretation of gained data: the data were processed using contrasts and comparisons, using the method of distinguishing of relationship, making tufts and searching for gestalts.

Partial aims also included:

- research, description and categorization of inclusion facilitators in terms of teaching artistic disciplines at particular types of schools;
- research, description and categorization of inclusion inhibitors in terms of teaching artistic disciplines at particular types of schools;
- research, description and categorization of the most effective forms and approaches of supervision for teachers of given schools;
- the comparison of gained partial results and their systematization at given types of schools and the generalisation of universal methodological principles of inclusion in terms of teaching artistic disciplines.

Another assumed issue was the analysis of methodological processes in order to make the methodological principles more accurate – from the perspective of:

- teachers;
- students with special educational needs;
- intact schoolmates;
- parents.

The realized action research has also become the topic of the first article of the project designed this way.

3 Action research

The data collection was realized in terms of focus groups of teachers of Art and Music Schools, elementary schools, kindergartens, secondary schools and conservatoires in spring and autumn 2018. A research team indicatively prepared an outline of basic topics which were supposed to be problematic and urgent. The participants of focus groups were given the opportunity of individual preferences and also to focus on topics and questions that were the most attractive to them. Therefore researchers intervened in conversations and discussions only minimally. Three focus groups were chosen where the participants were divided according to the types of schools.

All three focus groups were shot by video cameras and a sound recording was subsequently transcribed into verbatim forms. From these verbatim forms (each verbatim form contained about 120 pages of the text) researchers chose the most important topics on the basis of contrasts, overlapping, comparison, marking relations and making tufts. The most frequently occurring and the most urgently perceived topics were subsequently evaluated using Likert scales. In this way the urgency of problems that had appeared in focus groups was repeatedly evaluated. Evaluation this way created a first stage and a springboard for interventions that are supposed to improve a current state of educational work and teaching children with special educational needs artistic subjects at Art and Music Schools, elementary schools, kindergartens and conservatoires in the Czech Republic and pursued especially qualitative improvement of teachers' work in terms of inclusion of these children.

Likert scales containing clearly formulated categories of the most frequent topics OS enabled a well arranged and illustrative representation of serious problems and using a numerical grading also the rate of perceived urgency. In order to do an evaluation two Likert scales were created. Firstly they reflected the difference of perceived problems at elementary schools and kindergartens and on the other hand also at conservatoires and Art and Music Schools. The analysis of verbatim forms realized by OS has proved the existence of common problem areas but also an expected variability which is derived from specific conditions at these schools. The results of respondents' evaluation have been averaged (see indexes below). Likert scale contained altogether 9 evaluating degrees with a neutral centre – degree 5.

Analysis of results

Kindergarten and elementary school (N = 18), the number of categories = 16

to initiate the elimination of excessive administration	index: 8,61
to find and specify the boundaries for placement of a child with special educational needs to the educational process	index: 8,61

to improve special-pedagogical training of teachers in the context of their work with children with special educational needs	index: 8,16
to improve material equipment and security of schools	index: 8,11
to provide the presence of a psychologist – teaching artistic subjects with children with special educational needs	index: 7,88
to engage more actively in the context of exceptionally talented students	index: 7,83
<i>to favour “child’s experience” rather than adhering to the syllabus</i>	index: 7,66
Conservatoires and Art and Music Schools (N = 20), the number of categories = 24	
to initiate the elimination of excessive administration	index: 8,15
<i>to favour “child’s experience” rather than adhering to the syllabus</i>	index: 7,80
to support the involvement of graduates in cooperation with stem schools	index: 7,80
problems with artistic practice (see LŠ)	index: 7,65
to engage more actively in the context of exceptionally talented students	index: 7,60
to enable the presence of another teacher in subjects of common specialized basis and work experience	index: 7,35
to improve material equipment and security of schools	index: 7,15
to specify the methodology of evaluation of children with special educational needs at Art and Music Schools	index: 6,95
to adjust showing of artistic practice – e.g. teachers at concerts	index: 6,85

Notes: Bold – topics collectively considered to be urgent (in both groups), bold italics – the only topic of a higher index value at the group of respondents from conservatoires and Art and Music Schools.

4 Interpretation of results

Logical data analysis of both Likert scales showed the difference of perceived urgency of monitored and assessed problems not only at particular respondents but also at both groups. Teachers of kindergartens and elementary schools assessed obviously more actively than their colleagues from conservatoires and Art and Music Schools. The percentage of their positive options (preferred degrees of Likert scale of value 6–9) reached 83% which was exactly the same value as at teachers of conservatoires and Art and Music School, however at those there was distinctly higher percentage of undecided (that is ticking a neutral option). N = 18 ... 63 neutral options, N = 20 ... 88 neutral options.

The most burdensome problem of teachers is the excessive administration. This item of Likert scale “won” in both groups. However if we look at the overall assessment of teachers in both groups, then we can see a bigger accent of urgency expressed at teachers of elementary schools and kindergartens by the value of particular indexes. Only one case was an exception – the item “to favour child’s experience rather than adhering to the syllabus”. In this case the teachers from conservatoires and Art and Music Schools were more emphatic and strongly expressed their wish to do something about this problem.

In the above mentioned overview of Likert scales common categories of problems are written in bold. These are problems considered to be burdensome for both observed groups. Specific categories that did not meet any common analogical topics are written in normal script and the case of above mentioned topic preference which was preferred by the teachers from conservatoires and Art and Music Schools and which gained surprisingly bigger indexation in comparison with the first group of teachers from elementary schools and kindergartens is written in bold italics.

However the final results are not surprising at all. When discussing the results of Likert scales teachers agreed that one of the most efficient factors of high-quality teaching of artistic subjects is the quality of teachers themselves. They also pointed to the importance of creation of a collaborating teacher team. The matter of availability of experts should be solved by a headmaster very circumspectly. Some teachers proposed that the probationary period for new teachers should be prolonged.

During the discussion of focus groups it was also discussed the normal functioning of schools which seemingly did not concern children and students with special educational needs. However the participants of the discussion concluded that “normal” school functioning is the basic condition for the creation of surroundings of common high-quality teaching of children and students with special educational needs. Some participants of the discussion also mentioned a special role of artistic disciplines which often bring handicapped children the opportunity to show off in front of their peers and consequently to boost their self confidence. They also highlighted the importance of after-school activities that are especially public concerts, exhibitions, theatre performances, selling of self-made artistic artefacts at the market etc. At the end of IMUZA project gathering teachers discussing together in focus groups as well as in following debates appreciated the special occasion for consulting and exchanging opinions as well as for gaining inspiration and new enthusiasm for their work at school. This is probably another positive benefit of the realized focus groups and the whole project.

5 Another phase of the action research

After the assessment of Likert scales all participants of focus groups were informed about the results of Likert scales and they were repeatedly allowed to take part in the process of evaluation and also to add some topics, which were according to them missing in the overview of topics. The character of action research enabled that. However the potential addition of topics had to be expertly justified enough and initiated especially by teachers who took part in previous focus groups and who also participated in evaluation realized using Likert scales. In this phase of action research it was newly recommended to accept only topics which were not present in terms of focus groups and crystallized during the research and subsequent discussions. In terms of these initiatives the realization team of the action research made slight modifications and specification of observed categories.

6 Prediction of future steps of the action research

In a following phase of the action research the realization team will focus on a more detailed analysis of topics and requirements concerning innovation of school educational programmes (ŠVP) and other most proposed modifications. In terms of this analysis certain topics have been selected. These topics should be consulted in detail at following meetings during planned focus groups. These focus groups should be moderated sensitively in order to clarify some problematic areas and also to remove potential unrealistic requirements and associated expectations. However the participants of focus groups that will take place in 2019 will be able to introduce new incentives.

In the following phase of the action research another analysis of its results will be carried out. On that basis there will be suggestions for modifications of syllabus, didactic methods, forms and tools and also artefiletics in the broad sense including expressively-therapeutic procedures. Furthermore they will design and check the efficiency of above mentioned innovations in inclusive teaching of artistic disciplines.

In terms of preliminary results it is possible to state that the main goal of the action research is being successfully fulfilled. The beneficial effect of the whole IMUZA project will be proved only in case of the realization of proposed interventions which will stem from the most urgently perceived topics gained in terms of informal conversations, analyses of verbatim forms of focus groups and also indexation of subsequent Likert scales.

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