

Identification of supporting phenomena and barriers of inclusion in the pedagogical practice of teachers in a kindergarten in Bratislava, Slovak Republic

(Scientific paper)

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Abstract: *The paper deals with the issue of identification of supporting phenomena and barriers of inclusion in the pedagogical practice of teachers in a kindergarten in Bratislava from the perspective of an internal professional. We focused on the performance of direct educational practice of teachers with children. We observed how teachers in their work approached all the children in class who found themselves as a part of their mainstream group in this particular kindergarten. We were interested in how teachers can respond to differences among children, how they can react flexibly to what is happening in the classroom and expand their educational offer by what is commonly available in the daily life of the classroom. The data were obtained, processed and analysed by qualitative methodology. As part of the content analysis of the text, we extracted important categories, which we identify as supportive and, conversely, as barriers in the application of inclusive practice.*

Keywords: *inclusion, kindergarten, teachers, supporting phenomena, barriers*

1 Introduction

Kindergarten is a place where children with different levels of development, skills, abilities and needs meet. Children also come from different family and cultural backgrounds due to population migration or mixed marriages. More and more children with a different mother tongue are appearing in kindergartens. Furthermore, already at the level of pre-primary education, children are often divided into those with special educational needs (SEN) and intact children. Jursová-Zacharová et al. (2019) write that the number of children with diagnoses is increasing exponentially and thus the need for experts for children with SEN is growing, that the terms categorisation, deficit, SEN have become too established. At the same time, the issue of children with

difficulties in mainstream education is much broader and does not have to relate only to children with identified SEN or assigned diagnoses. Most children, in whom we observe various difficulties in mainstream education in a kindergarten, do not often have a diagnosis due to the nature of the dynamics of early childhood development. We often observe delayed development in various areas. Today, the teachers have to reckon with the fact of the diversity of children in their classrooms.

The Slovak Republic has adopted the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), which imposes a commitment to access to quality education at all levels for all children with disabilities on the same basis as others (Jursová-Zacharová et al., 2019). It is a challenge for mainstream education to ensure good conditions – material, personnel and professional. Meeting this challenge is a high standard for inclusive practice. Inclusion is becoming a very important topic in Slovakia and the key players of inclusion in their schools and classrooms are the teachers and newly created so-called inclusive teams. However, Danz (2019) emphasises, that inclusion does not mean paying attention to some children ('Inclusionskinder'). It is not a question of certain children integrating, but of achieving a common education for all children. This requires a shift in the teachers' work towards a rich educational community characterised by sufficient educational opportunities for all children to participate in life in their classroom and peer group (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Kováčová (2010) also writes about an inclusive classroom, where learning is organised in a way that respects the needs of each child. Such classroom is a space, where each child is conveyed what he or she needs. The main thing is to be able to expand in the pedagogical practice of the teacher what is commonly available to all children, and that is a complex pedagogical effort.

The ways in which teachers construct such an environment are not easily visible to observers, nevertheless we tried to do so from the point of view of our possibilities and from the point of view of an internal professional employee – a therapeutic pedagogue in a kindergarten in Bratislava. It was a private kindergarten, with a maximum of 40 children divided into four groups. The kindergarten also included children of foreigners living in Bratislava, as well as children with diverse dynamics of development, difficulties and individual needs. The kindergarten declared an inclusive philosophy and created conditions for the teachers, especially by forming groups with lower numbers of children, as well as providing constant leadership support, educational opportunities and the daily presence of professional staff for children who needed support until they were able to fully adapt and work independently or with an assistant in the classroom environment.

The aim was to monitor how the teachers approach in their work all the children in the class who found themselves as a part of their mainstream group in this particular kindergarten. We were interested in how teachers can respond to differences among children, how and whether they can include all children in the educational

process and how they can react flexibly to what is happening in the classroom and expand their educational offer by what is commonly available in everyday life (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

We asked ourselves two research questions:

1. What helps in teaching practice to increase the participation of all children in learning together, including those who require some level of support?
2. What are the obstacles and barriers in teachers' work in increasing the participation of all children in learning together, including those who require some degree of support?

2 Research methods

2.1 Sample composition

The selection of participants was intentional. It was an available sample of teachers, colleagues in a specific kindergarten in Bratislava. The criteria for their selection was qualification in the field of preschool pedagogy and long-term cooperation lasting for at least four years. Thus, there was a presumption of long-term cooperation to gain insight into their way of working and to identify the phenomena we focused on.

2.2 Data collection methods

Three data collection methods were used in conducting this research study:

- Observation of what is happening in the classroom with a focus on teachers' strategies, reactions, verbal formulations and statements towards children, mutual interaction and communication
- Participatory observation for the profound insight into the behaviour and thinking of the observed persons
- Narrative interview, where teachers were encouraged to talk freely about their teaching work with children.

2.3 Data analysis methods

Recording, documenting, transcription and content analysis of data were conducted. We recorded individual observations and outputs from the interview in writing on a record sheet. Subsequently, we re-wrote the notes. Each record sheet was provided with information of the time and place of observation. We obtained a substantial amount of text, which we analysed in terms of content and formulated significant categories. We focused on the essential topics and phenomena that led to answering the research questions.

3 Results

Question number 1: What helps in teaching practice to increase the participation of all children in learning together, including those who require some level of support?

Supporting phenomena of inclusion:

Positive attitude of the teacher and responsibility towards the child

In the interview, some teachers expressed their positive attitude towards children at risk or with difficulties they had in their classroom. They declared that they realised that such children needed to be supported in kindergarten and that the teachers were the key to it.

BI14 *"I am learning with all children, but those who have a problem are a challenge for me and I seem to be looking for the ways to help them."*

Expertise and knowledge

Teachers often mentioned that they needed to be educated and expand their professional skills.

NI35 *"It helps me a lot to learn, whether about the different needs of children or the issues I can encounter in the kindergarten, but also such practical things as how to set up a classroom, how to teach in a modern way."*

They also perceived it as necessary to have knowledge of individual children, their family background, difficulties and socio-cultural context and tried to take this into account in their approach to children. Tóthová (2020) deals with the importance of eco-systemic view of the child in her work.

Focus on educational process and open expectations

Within the observed sample, we identified a teacher who was more focused on the process of education in the sense that the children enjoy the activity and that they are interested in it. She was less concerned with the intention for children to learn or perform. Rather, she declared that she was satisfied that they had worked together and that every child was involved. She often built and organised her educational activities in this way; her educational activities had a very wide range and were well-developed and well-thought out.

DI22 *Description of a weekly project focusing on a fairy tale Grufallo:*

The children were reading the story, made costumes, played theatre and made a moving Grufallo puppet. "I was surprised, I was worried of how they could do it, but they did very well, I was happy how well they all did, we were happy with what we were doing. Nobody was interrupting because their activity drew them in, everyone

found their place in the activity and the children were looking forward to continuing the next day.”

Satisfying primary needs and creating a basis for learning

As a part of the observation, we extracted a category that we included as a support in relation to the inclusion of all children in educational activities. It is about mapping and satisfying the needs of a child, who may be uncomfortable, not involved, or be experiencing something, or who is not focused on the activity. Needs that include physiology, safety, sense of belonging, respect and self-realisation are extremely important in caring for very young children. (Dodge, Rudick & Berke, 2012). Maslow's theory is very well known. Teachers were not always aware of its sequence and importance when working with preschool children. From our point of view, within the philosophy of 'involving' everyone, it is very important to think about mapping and then satisfying the primary needs of the child before he or she starts learning, as this teacher has shown:

BP3 The teacher in the morning circle asks children: 'How are you today?' She sees that one child is turned around and is holding his toy. Children answer using emoticons, the teacher approaches the child and asks how he is. The child is not answering. The teacher naturally sits down next to him and sits him down on her lap. The child leans on her and is watching the others while the teacher can continue and pay attention to the other children. In a short while, the child moves and sits next to her and starts to cooperate.

The diversity of the offer and the deliberate transformation of educational activity for the benefit of the child

DP11 The teacher initiates the staging of the heard tale. One child is disruptive, runs away and then comes back. The teacher assigns this child the role of an animal – a frog, which is constantly running away from the pelican. The other children have roles within the heard tale. Some remain in the role of spectators; some are holding the scenery they drew in the morning.

The teacher noticed the child's restlessness and responded flexibly to his need for movement and used it to benefit the child's learning. She did not stigmatise this child but incorporated his demonstrations so that he would take part in the events. She did not use the simplest possible strategy – exclusion. She also had a wide offer within the range of education.

From the previous two categories, there is one category left which we characterised as supportive and pro-inclusive named **Details and Self-reflexive learning**. As a part of the educational process, it is important to constantly evaluate situations in the

classroom in favour of inclusion from the teacher's position – thinking about what is going on in interacting with children. These are often small details, for example at the level of nonverbal communication or perception. The teacher must often act effectively in the best interest of the child in the class and she must be aware of this as a part of her consistent self-reflection. She can also weigh in a small detail which will or will not support the child. This is well illustrated in the demonstration of DP11, where the teacher noticed the child's behaviour and considered what she can do best in the given situation for the benefit of the child and the group.

Question number 2: What are the obstacles and barriers in teachers' work in increasing the participation of all children in learning together, including those who require some degree of support?

Barriers of inclusion:

Ignorance

Teachers sometimes declared ignorance verbally, but also, by observation, we detected situations with inadequate intervention stemming from, for example, ignoring the child's developmental needs and limitations.

II44 *"I don't know how to work with this child, we didn't learn this at school."*

SP8 *The teacher has a child from Ukraine in adaptation in the first week of kindergarten, the child does not understand. He is sitting in the dining room, his legs turned sideways. The teacher is turning the child to sit correctly. The child is starting to cry and is apparently experiencing stress. To my question: Why doesn't she leave the child like that, after all, he is in the adaptation process and getting acquainted with the environment, she replied: He must learn how to sit properly.*

This is a case of ignorance of developmental psychology and the principles of the adaptation process.

Label – Deterministic thinking

This category declares that the teachers unnecessarily labelled or 'diagnosed' some children in advance or determined in advance what the child could not do without giving him a chance to express himself.

NI12 *"Why is this child here, why isn't he in a special needs kindergarten?"*

SI5 *"This child is walking on his tiptoes, it will be a nerve related problem."*

Weak self-confidence and transfer of responsibility

Especially for more 'complicated' children, who required more thought and work from the teacher, the teachers declared that this was not their job and they automati-

cally assigned the child to a professional, despite the fact that they had received the support in the educational process. We understand weak self-confidence in the sense that the teacher did not reflect her position of key importance in relation to the child with the identified need.

II33 *"I will not do this, let an expert do it, I cannot teach like this."*

Focusing on the child's individual performance as a reflection of his or her success rate

As we mentioned, we noticed a teacher who focused more on the process, the wide range, the child's freedom of choice and mutual learning. The children in this group achieved good results.

We also followed the strategies of another teacher, who was more focused on the performance of her group of children, so they would learn, so she would teach them. This teacher was more directive, the children achieved good results, but there was more discomfort and there were more stressful situations in the classroom.

SI28 *"I need them to know and I will give some children things to work on, to make the picture look more beautiful. You know what I mean."*

Exclusion as the most natural problem-solving strategy

Sometimes teachers used exclusion from the classroom as the most natural strategy if someone was disturbing or just needing a change, or movement or had other difficulties.

NP5 *The children went to sit with the activity at a table. It was a worksheet of simple mathematics. Two children were already sitting, the others were just sitting down. Two children got 'distracted' in the surroundings and came a little later. The teacher got angry and directly excluded two latecomers from the events into another class.*
SP56 *Counting activity. The teacher selects the children and assigns them tasks. She tells one boy, 'You stay, this is not for you.'*

Weak communication skills

Speech in preschool children is evolving and it is important to know and apply the right communication strategies with them – in addition to verbal, also non-verbal. Non-verbality can negate verbal statements or signal positions of power, which does not support proper interaction with the child.

HK12 *The child is sitting on a bench and does not know how to put his shoes on, the teacher is standing above him and is giving him instructions in a flow of speech, which the child does not catch. The child is crying.*

4 Discussion

The observations and the interviews we conducted provided us with a lot of material and were the subject of thinking about teaching. We focused on direct teaching practice in terms of how teachers approach all children in the classroom, who found themselves as a part of their group in mainstream education in this particular kindergarten. As teachers, they were able to involve everyone in the educational process as a part of their pedagogical work with children. When they did not, we were interested in what the barriers and obstacles were on their side.

Within some categories, we have found similar findings in the professional literature. For example, the category **Positive Teacher Attitude and Responsibility to the Child** can be compared to Rouse (2008), who writes that a common topic emerged during discussions with teachers and that many teachers believe they can change children's lives. Many said they were motivated to help vulnerable children but were frustrated that not all teachers shared this view. Jursová-Zacharová et al. (2019) stated that one of the essential factors of inclusion are teachers' attitudes towards inclusion and diversity, the ability to engage and motivate children and to form a relationship with the parents. The authors also talked about the so-called teachers' internal setting, which either helps or prevents inclusion. The categories **The diversity of the offer and the deliberate transformation of educational activity for the benefit of the child** and **The Focus in education on the process and open expectations** can be compared with the research of Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011). The authors describe the pedagogical action of a teacher Helen, whose steps lead to finding a way of how to support the child to make progress and success in the classroom in educational activity here and now. Helen is willing to look for other ways to help children engage in classroom activities by experimenting with different ideas and approaches and is expanding offers for children. Hornáková (2019) talks about the learning community. Kobelt Neuhaus (2012) emphasises the ability to treat the child as a co-designer of one's experience and action in the world. **Satisfying primary needs and creating a basis for learning** is, again, illustrated by the skill of the teacher Helen who is able to adapt her teaching to the needs of children by expanding what is normally available to all children (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). The categories **Knowledge** and vice versa **Ignorance** or **Weak Self-Confidence and Transfer of Responsibility** are interesting from the point of view of Rouse (2008), who argues that knowledge is important, but evidence suggests that it is insufficient to improve practice in schools, as many teachers who had participated in special training did not act on this knowledge when returning to class.

Forlin (2001) writes that one of the biggest obstacles to the development of inclusion is the fact that most teachers do not have the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes to do the job.

Labeling-Deterministic thinking, Exclusion without the need for detection as the closest problem-solving strategy and Focusing on the child's individual performance as a reflection of the degree of their success, Hornáková (2017) also describes many similar barriers. Within the category **Weak communication skills**, we considered how important it is to have knowledge of verbal as well as non-verbal communication and their effect on children in the sense of positives and negatives. As Kostrub writes (2018, p.140), *"Educational communication is an essential tool, so it must be conducted intentionally, prudently and responsibly. The educator intercedes with the child and the child responds to the challenge with his/her speech and his/her actions."* Waclawik, Bavelasová and Jackson (2012) say, that the ability to adequately meta-communicate is not only a necessary condition for successful communication, but is closely linked to the extensive issue of awareness of oneself and others, which is also related to the category **Details and self-reflexive learning**.

5 Limitations of the study

This was a research sample within one kindergarten that had an exclusive philosophy and attitude in terms of supporting those who needed it and who found themselves in mainstream education at that school. In kindergarten, efforts were made to ensure the inclusion of those who were excluded or marginalised. On the other hand, it was not possible to direct all teachers to this attitude, which could distort the observation of supportive inclusion strategies when working with children. Fortunately, we identified a few teachers who were naturally able to expand this attitude and their skills in terms of increasing the participation of all children in learning together, including those who require some level of support. Also, we recognise that understanding inclusion can take many forms and still goes a long way to grasping the phenomena of inclusion and putting them into practice.

6 Conclusions

We have identified some phenomena of inclusive practice and vice versa, those that do not support it. We sought to support our findings with research from abroad and we agree with Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) that inclusive pedagogy aims to expand what is commonly available as a part of routine classroom life as a way to respond to differences among students and not a specific individualization for some. From our point of view, it was interesting to follow the work of teachers who used more strategies that we included in the categories: **The diversity of the offer and the deliberate transformation of educational activity for the benefit of the child, Focus on process education and open expectations, Satisfying primary needs and creating a basis for learning, Details and self-reflexive learning** and which we

would identify as those that helped increase the participation of all children in learning together. It would be interesting to find out why teachers used these strategies. It would also be a good idea to expand the research by asking teachers directly what they consider to be pro-inclusive and, conversely, what they say does not support inclusion in the educational process. In our research we also captured phenomena that were not supportive of all children in the group, but we realise that the teachers' practice is multi-layered, and they make many decisions during the day the background of which we do not know. However, in research, we have noticed that there are types of teachers we could consider more 'inclusive' than the others. It would also be interesting to find out why this is so.

Finally, we would support the idea that a kindergarten is a good place to start an inclusive journey and that the teacher has to reckon with the fact that children in mainstream education need support due to the nature of their variability, development dynamics and high vulnerability in this period. It is important that teachers are professionally and personally trained. Furthermore, it would be useful to strengthen their pedagogical skills in knowledge of psychology, communication, special and therapeutic pedagogy, and for inclusive teams to appear in kindergartens, or at least an internal professional, who is absent in most kindergartens. As Jursová-Zacharová et al. (2019) write, the very attitudes of the teachers towards all children in their classrooms and their mindset are important.

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