

Educational objectives focused on adaptation of Czech pupils with severe special needs and the role of these objectives in educational documentation

(scientific paper)

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Abstract: *Intervention focused on the ability to adapt in pupils with severe special needs ability is an important part of their education. That is, however, not reflected in the Czech curriculum for special primary school – the most basic guideline for educating pupils with special needs in the Czech Republic. The goal of this study is to uncover what adaptation-related issues special needs pupils face and what solutions Czech teachers choose to address them. We obtained data from seven qualitative interviews with teachers who teach pupils with high levels of special needs, and autistic spectrum disorders, and who follow Czech curriculum for special primary schools. Inductive content analysis was used for further data sorting. The data was divided into three categories – description of adaptation-related issues, intervention focused on adaptation, and teacher-parent cooperation. We discovered that adaptation issues in educating pupils with high-level of special needs occur as they enter the school system, as they adapt to new people, schedules, school environments, and group activities, and as they face various perceptual inputs. Based on this analysis we provide examples of how to word educational objectives in each of these areas in the curricular documentation and specific suggestions on how these objectives can be integrated into the Czech curriculum for special primary schools.*

Keywords: *Special needs, autistic spectrum disorder, sever disability, education, Czech curriculum for special primary schools, curriculum, documentation*

1 Introduction

The current reform of Czech curricular documentation that is taking place in the Czech Republic allows space for reflection of these key documents that define and frame the conditions for educating pupils. One of the newest of these documents is

Czech curriculum for special primary schools (VUP, 2008), which regulates education of pupils with severe special needs, especially in its second part. This second part titled “Education of pupils with severe mental disability and multiple disabilities” addresses work with pupils for whom education was not accessible in the past. The Czech department of education only took some legal steps to provide first educational opportunities to these pupils at the end of the 20th century. These established preparatory classes of special schools later so-called rehabilitation classes (Valenta, Müller, 2022). Educating pupils with high level of special educational needs (SEN) was always significantly more challenging and very different from educating pupils with less serious levels of SEN (Kantor, 2015).

These issues also seriously impacted the development of legal documents that outline the educational content for pupils with high levels of SEN. Significant part of the educational programme in so-called rehabilitation classes was almost literally copied from the educational programme for preparatory classes of special schools. This programme’s design influences the education of pupils with high levels of SEN to this day. The curriculum is flawed on many levels including the use of outdated and inappropriate terminology and strong focus on developmental skills which is typical for work of younger pupils (Nietupski et al., 1997). Some of the areas of educational objectives that are key for these pupils need more elaboration in the curriculum – for example the objectives oriented towards adaptation of the pupils (Ludíková, 2013).

Adaptation issues are typical for pupils with higher levels of SEN (Hrebeňárová, 2016) and are connected to lower levels of adaptability or “the ability of an individual to adapt to a new environment – social or natural” (Hartl, Hartlová, 2010, s. 12). Of people with high level of SEN pupils diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) face issues with adaptation most commonly. Their issues connected to adaptation can be explained by the neurological disorders that manifest in perceptual and cognitive differences (Boucher, 2017), in sensory processing disorders (Schaaf, Mailloux, 2015) and other symptoms that result in low adaptability in different educational situations. These situations include the pupils’ first encounter with the school as well as any more significant change in the educational process. Some psychological theories explain adaptability disorders – for example adaptive and maladaptive coping behaviour model (Schopler, Mesibov, 1997) which connects non-adaptive behaviour with stress or anxiety, lack of effective coping strategies and relatively high levels of the pupils’ vulnerability. This vulnerability is, paradoxically, present even when non-adaptive behaviour takes the form of physical aggression.

During their education, pupils with high level of SEN need to learn not only to handle stressful situations in which adaptation issues manifest, but also continuously practise adaptation. Higher tolerance of change is very important for these pupils because it makes it easier for them to lead their lives in everyday settings, increases their opportunities for social interactions and enhances their overall quality of life

(Hall, 2017). Studies also show that adaptation issues are viewed by the pupils' caregivers and wider social circle as very serious.

Pupils' adaptation to new stimuli can be improved through a number of strategies, including structuring the environment, creating a good classroom climate, practising social skills, problem-solving strategies, developing functional communication, etc. (Hall, 2017; Thorova, 2016). Adaptation objectives are common in some intervention programs used with these pupils. These include, for example, structured learning (Čadilová, Žampachová, 2008), the TEACCH programme (Schopler, Reichler, & Lansig, 2011), or applied behavioural analysis (Mikurčíková & Ivanková, 2018). Many of these strategies are well known in our environment and are used in Czech schools for pupils with SEN. That is why we were interested in how the current curricula, especially the curriculum for special primary schools, conceptualise this issue.

Before starting this study, we conducted a preliminary analysis of the curriculum for primary education and the curriculum for special primary schools. The aim was to trace all statements that relate in any way to pupil adaptation as an educational goal. Through content analysis, we identified statements about adaptation to the water environment and non-specific statements claiming that certain educational areas promote social adaptability, physiological adaptability of the organism, etc. (a detailed list of all statements is provided in Appendix 1). These examples did not relate in any way to the most serious adaptation problems that these pupils faced or were not phrased in an appropriate way, e.g. 'not to be afraid of unpleasant noises' (VUP, 2008, p. 83). This means that the educational goals of adaptation for pupils with severe SEN are not sufficiently conceptualised in the curriculum.

This is one of the key shortcomings of the current curriculum for special primary schools, which prompted this study, the methodology and results of which are presented in the following sections. Our intention was to conceptualize the issue of adaptation inductively, based on the current pedagogical practice of Czech teachers. We set ourselves two objectives, namely, to find out (1) what adaptation problems in the school environment are experienced by pupils who are educated according to the curriculum for special primary schools from the teachers' perspective, (2) what types of strategies and procedures teachers use to cope with these adaptation issues, or to practise pupils' adaptability based on their experience. Although there are intervention studies that have investigated the effectiveness of particular interventions (e.g., Shire, Kasari, 2014; Virues-Ortega, Pastor-Barriuso, 2013; Mohseni et al., 2015; and others), in this study we aimed to understand local pedagogical practice and to determine how Czech teachers use particular strategies in the context of the adaptation issues of particular pupils and educational situations. At the same time, we sought to ensure that the results of the study would have practical use for teachers and could serve as a complementary basis for possible amendments to the curricula

(especially the curriculum for special primary school) to include objectives related to the adaptation needs of pupils.

Moreover, in this study, we purposely limited the scope of severe SEN to pupils diagnosed with ASD. This was guided by the fact that adaptive objectives represent a key area of education for these pupils, and that the most sophisticated intervention strategies are designed for this group of pupils. The results we obtain will, however, be applicable to other pupils with severe levels of SEN.

2 Methodology

Research Questions:

- Which adaptation issues do teachers face when educating pupils with ADS following part II of curriculum for special primary schools?
- What strategies and approaches do teachers use to handle these adaptation issues in pupils with ADS following part II of curriculum for special primary schools?

The research sample in this study consisted of teachers who educate pupils with PAS according to Part II of the curriculum for special primary school (further referred to as research participants). To be included in the research the participant had to have at least 2 years of full-time teaching experience with these pupils. However, teachers with longer experience, working in various schools and in various demographic areas were preferred to obtain a sufficiently heterogeneous sample. To recruit participants, we contacted 24 primary schools for pupils with SEN from different regions in the Czech Republic via email, or a telephone call. All the selected schools educate pupils with high level of SEN. In the end, seven special educators agreed to participate in the research, six women and one man. The experience of these teachers ranged from 2 years to 29 years (average 10 years). They all had a master's degree (in special education) and were from the following demographic areas: the South Moravian Region (2 participants), the Kralovehradecky Region, the Moravian-Silesian Region, the Olomouc Region, the Central Bohemia Region, and the Zlín Region (except for one case, these were towns with populations over 20,000). Participants will be further identified by the letter U and a numerical code.

The objectives of the study were explained to each participant before the interview. We obtained their consent to participate in the study, outlined the conditions of participation, and reminded them of the option to withdraw from the interview at any time. All teachers were also guaranteed anonymity. We agreed on the conditions under which excerpts from the interviews can be published. We did not seek approval of the ethics committee; the implementation of the study was guided by the Declaration of Helsinki. The research took place from January to April 2021.

We collected the data by the method of semi-structured interviews. The structure of the interview included the following topics:

- In what areas do adaptation issues of pupils with PAS manifest?
- What circumstances affect the adaptive ability of pupils with PAS?
- How do teachers deal with specific adaptation issues of pupils with PAS?
- What role do teachers and the classroom environment play in the adaptation of a pupil with PAS?
- What role do parents play in the adaptation of a pupil with PAS?

To get as much insight as possible into the possible perspectives of the pupils themselves (who for logical reasons could not be included in this study), we decided to include descriptions of specific situations related to specific pupils in the interviews. The interviews were conducted in an undisturbed setting (e.g., in classrooms after hours) and lasted around 60 minutes. Because we aimed to gain greater sensitivity to the perceptions of the phenomenon under investigation and the context in which the phenomenon was being studied, the interviews were conducted in most cases after the first author of this paper had been in the pupils' classrooms for several hours.

After the individual interviews were conducted, the data was transcribed into text and prepared for analysis. That way we obtained a text that was further structured by colouring passages of text relating to the same topics (the same colour was always used for a particular topic). The evaluation of these interviews was based on inductive content analysis with an open coding procedure (Strauss and Corbin, 1999). As Švaříček and Šedová (2014, p. 211) state, "in open coding, the text as a sequence is broken into units, these units are given names, and the researcher then works with the newly named (labelled) text fragments". During the coding process, categories were created by comparing and classifying the units of meaning (codes) and the concepts contained within them, trying to determine whether they related to another similar phenomenon or formed a separate distinguishable unit. By searching for connections in the data and linking parts together to form larger units, codes were grouped into higher-order categories and subcategories. During our work, we were constantly reflecting the content of the data considering the research questions, which influenced the resulting arrangement of categories and subcategories. In the end, three categories were created relating to the characteristics of adaptation problems, interventions aimed at adaptation problems, and collaboration between teaching staff and parents. These categories contained a total of eight subcategories.

3 Results

The analysis results – Table 1 presents categories, subcategories, and their characteristics. A narrative description of each category and subcategory follows.

Table 1: *Overview of categories, subcategories and their characteristics*

Category	Subcategory	Characteristics
Adaptation issues characteristics	General characteristics	Adaptation problems are present in most pupils with PAS, they change over time, manifest in different areas and to different degrees; intervention must be individually focused.
	Factors affecting adaptation	Type of ASD, severity of mental disability, adaptability of the pupil, personality of the pupil (his/her character, temperament, etc.), associated disorders, current psychological state, previous experience with pre-school education, upbringing and guidance in the family, quality of cooperation with parents, guidance of the teacher and classroom climate, characteristics of special education support.
	Areas of adaptation issues	Adaptation problems at school entry, issues with adaptation to different people present at school, to the daily schedule, to changes in the school environment, to cooperation in group activities, to various perceptual stimuli.
Intervention focused on adaptation issues	Key guidelines and principles	Structuring, visualization, individualization, illustration, appropriateness and sustainability, success of teaching, stability, consistency
	Teacher's characteristics	Empathy, patience, friendly attitude and interest in the pupil.
	Strategies and approaches	Creating a pleasant climate preventively, adjusting the environment, training for changes, gradually increasing the learning load, working with another teacher, rewards, rewards, withholding a favourite activity, feedback, repeated explanations and reassurances, etc.
Cooperation with parents	Key role	Reasons why parents have such an important role in adaptation – many pupils with ASD are unable to communicate important information, and in many cases the intervention has to be planned and implemented together (typically at school entry).
	Partnership	Partnership characteristics, listening to parents.

Characteristics of students' adaptation problems (category 1)

Adaptation problems occur in many pupils with ASD who are educated according to part II of the curriculum for special primary schools. Sometimes these problems are of severe nature, which significantly disrupts the educational process or even makes it completely impossible. The adaptation objectives of the educational process are therefore important for everyone involved – for the pupils themselves, but also for

teachers, teaching assistants, other staff and, of course, for the parents. Moreover, adaptation problems are very heterogeneous and can be related to a wide variety of stimuli: "Pupils with ASD have individual adaptation difficulties, with the classroom environment, the arrangement of furniture, the daily schedule, their classmates, teaching staff, but also with everyday things" (U3). As stated by U2, problems can start as soon as they enter the school premises: "The very entrance to the building and the collective of children in the classroom is a problem. A boy I have in my class is particularly bothered by the collective of children. He gets angry, cries, stomps. But it's different for everyone."

During the interviews, teachers named various factors that affect the adaptation of pupils with ASD. These included factors related to the diagnosis and special needs, but also to the pupil's personality (e.g. his temperament), his previous experiences (e.g. previous inclusion in pre-school education) and other environmental factors. U4 states that "the situation may change according to the pupil's current state of mind, mood, health, weather...". Already overcome adaptation issues may reappear or increase during puberty.

The category characterizing students' adaptation problems was heavily infused with statements that related to descriptions of areas in which adaptation issues occur. These areas relate to the relationships to the environment, people, activities, stages of learning, various perceptual stimuli, and other conditions under which adaptation problems occur.

The first of these areas addresses the issues of adaptation upon pupils' entry to school. Teachers' experience shows that the first requirement for successful adaptation in this case is to prepare a suitable environment. In the process of adaptation, this environment should be stable, structured, supported by visualisation and without major changes. The adaptation process optimally starts before the start of school. U1 describes this process for one pupil: "We were in the process of enrolling a new pupil, and she had been coming for almost a year and a half for a gradual adaptation. First she only visited the school, then she just sat in the classroom with her legal guardian, then she was assigned a place to work that will not change, then she worked with a parent, and then with a teacher. Visiting time was also increased gradually. At the beginning it was just one hour, then two hours, then she tried a snack, etc." Close collaboration with parents is essential in this area (U7).

Behavioural problems may arise in the process of pupils' adaptation to school staff and classmates: "When problematic behaviour occurs, it is important not to relate the aggressive behaviour to oneself. I just must make sure that both he and I are safe" (U1). An important part of this process is also work with other pupils in the classroom, who must learn to respond appropriately to challenging situations and not encourage escalation of risky incidents. The process of adaptation must move forward by building mutual trust between pupil and teaching staff.

U4 describes the adaptation to the daily schedule and changes at school: “Again, it is unique to each individual, some pupils do not have a problem with the changes... One of the pupils moves things to where they belong, straightens furniture, tools, things.” In addition to a range of strategies such as following a routine, clear and understandable instructions, and regular school attendance, U1 also mentioned the positive role of time and the importance of teacher consideration, “They find it difficult to respond. Gradually they get used to it and usually they adjust. I avoid things unless they are necessary. As I get to know the pupil, I generally work to ensure the calmest possible process. If I need to try a new activity, a new room for example – I try it for as short a time as possible and respond to the pupils’ reaction. We practise gradually. If a pupil refuses an activity, I don’t reject it completely, but I try to offer it again on another day.”

There have been many changes in schools recently because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This has been particularly challenging for pupils with severe SEN (U5): “In the current ‘covid’ era, coping with change is harder. They don’t want to wear the mask, they don’t want to have online classes, then they don’t want to go to school again, it always takes time to get used to the new situation, but they always accept it in the end, and although they often comment on it, they know that there is nothing else they can do. They are medicated at home; we explain to them that there will be a change so that they are ready for it. They get used to it; they just talk about it all the time at first.”

Adaptation to cooperation in group activities is extremely important in school collectives, as many group learning activities take place even in classes where pupils are educated according to the curriculum for special primary schools. Teachers reported that their pupils with ASD have difficulties in this area to varying degrees, ranging from an inability to tolerate a collective of pupils, to the ability to tolerate others without actively engaging in joint activities, to tolerance of the collective, but at the cost of frequent conflicts and difficult situations.

In addition to cooperation with classmates, some specifics of students’ sensory perception were mentioned in interviews with teachers, such as hypersensitivity to certain sounds, visual or tactile stimuli. These stimuli may be more prevalent in certain subjects, e.g. music, sensory or art education. The situations in which pupils are unable to tolerate a perceptual stimuli tend to be considerably unpredictable for teachers, as pupils with ASD have a different threshold of sensitivity for perceiving these stimuli.

Intervention focused on issues with adaptation in pupils (category 2)

Statements related to the intervention were divided into three subcategories. In the first two subcategories, which related to key principles, guidelines, and important

teacher qualities, teachers described the application of commonly known rules such as structuring, visualization, individualization, demonstrativeness, appropriateness, and sustainability. U7 applies the principle of the need for successful teaching: "I find it very important that the pupil must know that learning is a game. When they do something well, they get great joy out of it, and then the sense of 'I can do it and you know that about me.' Then the child develops a sense of self-worth and matures into a positive person." The physical environment and communication with a student with ASD should be characterized by stability and consistency.

Teachers also mentioned some important qualities that are necessary for an effective adaptation process, such as empathy, patience, kindness, calmness, optimism, and interest in the pupil. As stated by U7: "A firm kind teacher". The teacher needs not only patience given the often-slow progress of pupils, but also a realistic assessment of the pupils' capabilities (U4): "progress is very small and slow, one must not have exaggerated expectations, not be discouraged by this, proceed patiently, reasonably, do not overload the pupils". The teacher also needs sufficient self-reflection to be able to recognise her own psychological state and to adapt her work with the pupils accordingly (U4): "Pupils are very sensitive and can sense when the teacher is not at ease, then it reflects on the pupils themselves."

The second sub-category covered a wide range of strategies and approaches. Teachers talked about creating a pleasant climate as a prevention of problematic behaviour in the adaptation of the pupil (U4): "Positive relationships and an overall positive climate in the classroom, in the collective, is central to working with these pupils". Pairing with the pupil (adapting and forming a relationship with the teacher and the environment, materials, etc.) helps in this regard. The climate in some classrooms has a family-like atmosphere (U3): "The overall atmosphere in the classroom is important and is kept friendly or even family-like. Furthermore, communication between staff and pupils, which is always kind and welcoming, yet respectful of the teacher's authority, contributes to the classroom climate. Last but not least, the climate is also influenced by procedural prerequisites such as the alternation of interesting activities during the lessons and the avoidance of stressful situations for the pupils." The modification of the environment also includes the structuring of the space, the unchangeability and relative permanence of the environment. Similarly important is the creation of a predictable daily routine. Some teachers said they try to avoid major changes. Another preventive strategy is to prepare pupils for changes or activities, e.g. by repeatedly reminding them of the upcoming change through visualised routines or verbal communication.

An individual approach to the pupil is possible by determining their current level and gradually increasing the workload, e.g. by extending the length of the lessons. This requires an adjusted time allocation and a teaching assistant, as teaching often cannot take place within the normal 45-minute teaching time. U7 states, "for

example, one little boy needs to run all the time, he can't sit still for long. We use a minute timer a lot. The little boy knows he has to sit for the minute to ring and if he can do that, he gets a reward. So, in little steps like that, it works." Although one-to-one teaching is a significant component of instruction for pupils with severe SEN, group activities cannot be avoided. Teachers reported great importance of morning circles – ritualised morning meetings that follow a pre-arranged pattern and thus facilitate pupils' adaption to the teaching routine.

Strategies for dealing with maladaptive behaviour, e.g. aggression, are described by U3: "We help the pupil to understand the situation by explaining it and naming his emotions. We try to ask questions so that there is mutual understanding and point out what is important in the situation. In this way, the pupils gain information about their behaviour and the effect on their environment, and they also find out which of their behaviours are reflected in the behaviour of others, so that they can adjust and adapt their conduct." U7 uses emoticons to name emotions and then express them. This helps pupils avoid escalating internal tensions. U4 tries to avoid triggers of negative emotions by removing them or avoiding them if possible.

Other strategies mentioned included appreciation, rewards, withholding favourite activities, feedback, creative and fun activities (to increase engagement in activities), repeated explanation and reassurance, etc. U4 pointed out the importance of the collaboration of teaching staff: "The collaboration of teaching staff is also important, we consult the activities together, we know exactly who has to do what."

Cooperation with parents (category 3)

Cooperation with parents of pupils with severe SEN is extremely important, therefore we have singled out this topic as a separate category. The importance of cooperation with the family is highlighted by the fact that these pupils are often not able to pass on the information that teachers or parents need (U4): "the information from the parents on how the pupils behave at home, how they acted in the previous institution, what their interests are, what they do not like, is very important for teachers in the adaptation of the pupil, so that they can then work actively with it. It is very beneficial if parents and teachers communicate daily, any problems, uncertainties can be resolved immediately."

U3 continues: "At arrival and departure, the parents and the class teacher keep each other updated on the pupil's mood and condition so that they can keep each other informed of what is happening and adjust the pupil's further activities. Parents play an indispensable role in this task. ... After school, they ask the pupil about their school experience and help them to make the best of their education and the adaptation process." In some cases, close collaboration is also necessary for the actual

implementation of the intervention, as described, for example, in the section on school adjustment.

The cooperation between the family and the school should ideally take a form of partnership (U4): “The role of the parent in the educational process is very important, optimally the parent should be a partner of the school, be helpful, actively participate in the whole process, including adaptation.” U7 views the idea of partnership primarily as listening to the parents. “We try to listen to parents a lot, it is very valuable for them to see that they are important to us and that we are simply interested in them.”

4 Discussion

The results of this study show the variety of areas that teachers in Czech schools must deal with in relation to the adaptation of pupils with severe SEN. Using data collected from seven teachers, we identified areas of adaptation problems related to school entry, different people present in the school, daily schedule, changes in the school environment, cooperation in group activities and diverse perceptual stimuli. These findings are consistent with previously published findings (Hall, 2017; Granteesheh et al., 2014; Reichow et al., 2011).

Another aim of this study was to describe specific strategies and practices that teachers use to address pupils’ adaptation issues. From the principles and guidelines reported by the teachers, it is evident that their practice is still strongly influenced by the intervention methods that were introduced into Czech special education practice at the time of the opening of the first rehabilitation classes. This includes structured learning (Čadilová, Žampachová, 2008), which is based on the TEACCH programme (Schopler, Reichler, Lansig, 2011). The influence of behavioural techniques, such as behavioural conditioning techniques or task analysis (Richman, 2006), is also evident.

The quality of cooperation between parents and teachers is another factor that fundamentally determines the process of adaptation of pupils with high level of SEN (Kantor, Ludíková, 2015; Mitchell, Sutherland, 2022). Especially when entering the school setting, it is virtually impossible to help pupils adapt easily and quickly without close cooperation between the family and the school. For this collaboration to be successful, a description of specific strategies is simply not sufficient, although the practical implementation of this collaboration relies on certain strategies, e.g. strategies for communication and information transfer. However, it is above all about recognising the key role that parents of pupils with severe SEN have in the educational process, the need to listen to them and to treat them as partners.

The overview of strategies and practices that we developed from the data collected through interviews does not pretend to comment on the effectiveness of each strategy, given the type of study. Thus, it should in no way be considered a recommendation for the use of specific strategies. In this study, we have explored this area mainly to

gain a deeper understanding of local teaching practice, which will enable us to offer specific suggestions and recommendations. These suggestions are appended to this paper at <https://osf.io/3r2k6/>.

Reflection on the study's limits

During the preparation, implementation, and production of the publication output of this study, we reflected on some strengths and limitations of the procedure that may have influenced the nature of the resulting conclusions. Among the limitations is the fact that we used only one source of data gathering, which may have been biased. Similarly, we did not include teaching assistants and other professionals whose relationship with pupils with severe SEN is different from that of teachers in the research sample. Further research in this area could therefore focus on collecting data primarily from other teaching professionals and paraprofessionals. For logical reasons, we were unable to conduct interviews with the pupils themselves and access to their parents was difficult during the pandemic (the study was conducted as part of the undergraduate thesis of Bc. Anna Šudřichová in the period 2020–2021).

In this study, we also did not expect to obtain new original strategies regarding the adaptation of pupils with high level of SEN. In fact, the teachers in this study largely described what is already known from Czech or foreign literature. This study helped us to provide a context for conceptualizing educational goals related to adaptation from the perspective of current teachers and their educational practice. This study also did not aim for a deep phenomenological exploration of the topic, which was not accommodated by the data collection and analysis procedure.

5 Conclusion

Teachers of pupils with high level of SEN deal with a wide range of adaptation problems related to school entry, the people present during education process, schedule of the day, changes in the school environment, cooperation in group activities and diverse perceptual stimuli. In terms of intervention, teachers consider collaboration with parents to be very important. Since adaptation goals are not addressed at all by the current curricula (especially the curriculum for special primary schools), in the appendices of the paper (see <https://osf.io/3r2k6/>) we offer concrete examples of how these objectives can be worded in pedagogical documentation and suggest how to incorporate the issue of adaptation of pupils with severe SEN into the current curriculum for special primary schools.

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