Abstract

In the Czech Republic, legislative changes took place in 2016 in order to support inclusive education. These changes also aimed at strengthening the role of assistant teachers in the educational process. The analyses carried out by the authors suggested the need for a broader examination of the relationships between the teacher and assistant teacher in primary school.

The objective of the paper is thus to present the results of a questionnaire survey, the objective of which was to analyse the specifics of the relationship between the teacher and assistant teacher in primary school in the Czech Republic.

The overall number of respondents was 991 across schools in the Czech Republic. Responses were obtained from 634 (male/female: 70/564) teachers and 357 (male/female: 8/349) assistant teachers. Data collection was carried out in 01–10/2018. The respondents were selected by means of deliberate exhaustive sampling.

The results suggest that there is a need for effective and high-quality communication, not only between teachers and assistant teachers, but also other employees such as educational counsellors, school psychologists, and special education teachers. The research also shows that both teachers and assistant teachers are overwhelmed by administration, which according to their responses makes education more complicated.

Keywords: teacher, assistant teacher, joint education, communication, inclusion.

1 INTRODUCTION

The paper presents a part of an extensive study mapping the process of inclusion in the Czech Republic. This research was carried out as part of a project implemented by the Institute of Special Education Studies, Palacký University Olomouc [1].

This research focused on the needs of educational staff in relation to inclusive education and their opinions about this issue, both from a general perspective and in terms of specific types of impairment [2].

The Czech Republic is, with various success, advancing towards inclusive education. The much debated legislative changes in education in recent years are the proof. More and more children, pupils and students with special educational needs are educated in mainstream schools despite the fact that members of both the lay and professional community are not fully convinced about the social value of this type of education.

Important institutions in the context of promoting inclusive education in the Czech Republic are traditionally educational and psychological counselling centres. However, due to the new legislation, these centres are overwhelmed by work and related administration [3].

One of the support measures to facilitate the process of inclusion is the assistant teacher. In the last two years, as a result of the new legislation, the number of these employees has increased.

A research study aimed at the attitudes to inclusion in the Czech Republic performed in 2017 [1] suggested a need for a detailed investigation of the role of assistant teachers in Czech education, both in terms of (inclusive) education and the teacher as the “class manager” of the process of education [2].

For this reason, a research study was performed in 2018, the objective of which was to describe the position of assistant teachers in terms of quality and their relationships with teachers. Part of the comprehensive research was a survey, the results of which are presented in this paper.
2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Basic sample and selection sample
The overall number of respondents was 991 across schools in the Czech Republic. Responses were obtained from 634 (male/female: 70/564) teachers and 357 (male/female: 8/349) assistant teachers. Data collection was carried out in 01–10/2018. The respondents were selected by means of deliberate exhaustive sampling. In the process of data collection and analysis, respondent anonymity was guaranteed. The inclusion criteria were the current position of a teacher or assistant teacher in primary school and their willingness to participate in the research.

2.2 Research objectives and intents
The objective of the research was to identify, analyse and describe the following aspects:

The following aspects were analysed:
- Communication and personal relationships,
- Administration,
- Teaching organization.

The items of the questionnaire were based on the focus groups described above. The area of communication and personal relationships aimed at questions relating to what assistant teachers require from teachers and school managers and what teachers require from assistant teachers and school managers.

The areas of teaching organization and administration focused especially on the proportion of teaching activity and FTE.

2.3 Survey questionnaire
To obtain a basic body of usable data a qualitative approach was used. The questionnaire was designed by the authors to obtain data from a large number of respondents. A simple on-line environment available at mojeanketa.cz was used. The questionnaire was accessed via a link especially established for this purpose. The survey questionnaire comprised 9 key items. Three items were multiple choice (a,b,c,d); the remaining items provided space for free answers.

Regarding the fact that the primary method was a semi-structured interview, a questionnaire with free answers appeared suitable for triangulation and validity. A general advantage of open-ended questions is a more reliable response and the fact that the respondent is motivated to reflect on the issue. The predominance of free answers in the questionnaire also stems from an effort to avoid too many responses to closed items. The disadvantage of free responses is evaluation and interpretation.

2.4 Results of the questionnaire survey
After an analysis of the free responses the results were divided into the following thematic areas corresponding with the target categories of the qualitative research: communication, relationships and administration. These areas are described from the perspective of assistant teachers and teachers. The following areas are involved:
- Proportion of teaching activity,
- Methodological support,
- Personal support (educational counsellor, special education teacher, school psychologist),
- Obstacles at work,
- Mutual needs.

Given the limited number of pages of the paper, only the last two categories are presented, i.e. Obstacles at work and Mutual needs.
3 RESULTS

3.1 Obstacles at work

The three most significant problems as perceived by assistant teachers combine problems in interpersonal relationships: cooperation with parents, cooperation with pupils and their classmates, and cooperation with teachers. Problems with parents are described in more detail compared with teachers. They often stem from non-acceptance of their child’s impairment, inadequate demands on assistant teachers (parents confuse them with personal assistants or servants), inadequate demands on their children’s performance. Problems with pupils often stem from failure to achieve the expected results – assistants often complain about children being lazy and unwilling to learn. The question is to what extent this is really caused by a lack of their interest in learning or inadequate setting of methods and objectives and limited experience of assistant teachers with educational activities. Regarding the fact that tandem cooperation between the teacher and assistant teacher is still insufficient (as confirmed by the Czech School Inspectorate), these problems might be related to insufficient competences of teachers and excessive demands on academic achievement.

The obstacles that assistant teachers mention in relation to classmates are often associated with high numbers of children per class, insufficient space for group and individual work, and excessive noise that accompanies the presence of several teachers in class.

A surprising fact is the high number of responses that specifically describe problems with communication with the teacher (for example “the teacher absolutely refuses the assistant’s strategy, some teachers consider the assistant to be subordinate and useful only for supervision and cover teaching”). Unfortunately, there were few responses suggesting that some teachers refuse to respect the pupils’ special needs and leave the responsibility for their education to the assistants.

These problems are not primarily related to the financing of joint education project but rather reflect the non-acceptance of the whole concept by a part of the educational community. They are also closely related to insufficient training of all teachers in the area of partnership communication, mediating skills, and mentoring techniques, i.e. communication based on the principle of partnership and monitoring the progress of every pupil.

Surprisingly, the low salary for this demanding job was fourth in terms of the number of responses. A positive finding is that almost one-fifth of respondents indicated satisfaction at work without any serious obstacles. If there are some, they try to resolve them effectively to prevent any negative consequences.

The obstacles as identified by teachers are clearly dominated by excessive administration, often considered useless, duplicate, performed solely for the purposes of inspection authorities, and not bringing any positives for the educational process. In this context, teachers are also doubtful about the effectiveness of applicable legislation and adequacy of the framework educational programme (FEP), which are the basic documents governing their work. Some teachers believe that there is a discrepancy between the requirement for individualized education and the obligation to achieve the results prescribed in FEP for all learners.

Another strongly perceived problem is communication with parents. About one-half of respondents describe this cooperation as taking place “occasionally” or “sometimes”. These negative judgements do not apply to all parents, but still confirm the generally acknowledged statement that there are serious problems in the area of school-family communication. An interesting finding is that the negative assessments suggest that some parents do not cooperate at all but also that there are “excessively zealous mothers whose incessant comments castigate the teaching process”.

The third problem concerns class sizes. These responses complain about too many learners per class (numbers exceeding 30 children), too many learners with special educational needs per class (as many as 6 children requiring support measures classified 3 to 5), and combinations of a high number of intact learners, learners with SEN, and talented learners. Another negative belief concerns class heterogeneity; some teachers claim that they need to prepare as many as three plans for a single lesson. They complain about the fact that their teaching style resembles teaching at a school with combined classes. The situation is further complicated by the absence of an assistant teacher or by bad teacher-assistant relationships. Some responses mentioned an insufficiently prepared and non-functional concept of inclusion, which is impossible to be implemented.
Only few responses criticize the low teacher’s salary, insufficient competence of assistant teachers, limited communication with school counselling centres, and insufficiently specific recommendations given by these centres.

### 3.2 Mutual needs

The preferences of assistant teachers concerning methodological support in education are almost identical with those of teachers’. Again they clearly prefer regular feedback (almost 29%) and ad hoc consultations (almost 28%). The number of responses concerning preparation for classes is identical with the number of responses concerning the preferences of an informal interview with teachers. Consistently with teachers’ responses, only 9% of assistant teachers would appreciate being supported by a supervisor. The question is to what extent this situation is affected by the low subsidy allocated for assistant teachers’ indirect work. Informal interviews, irregular consultations, feedback – all of these are forms of cooperation of a freer nature compared with the frequently formal and time-specific preparation for classes.

Teachers clearly prefer those forms of communication that retroactively (whether on a regular basis or irregularly) evaluate the teaching process: more than 30% of respondents prefer regular feedback; less than 26% of respondents prefer consultations when needed. Joint preparation for classes was third and was suggested by 18% of teachers. The question is to what extent the outcomes of the preferred feedback are reflected in subsequent lesson planning.

Considering the dramatic increase in the number of newly hired assistant teachers after 2016, it is surprising that less than one-fifth of teachers prepare lessons together with assistant teachers who take part in classroom activities. Less than 9% of teachers state that they would appreciate the support of a third person – in this case a supervisor. This clearly shows the reality of Czech education, in which teachers have never been systematically trained in sharing their teaching approaches and in teamwork.

The question: “What else do you need for your work?” aimed at assistant teachers was most frequently answered by suggesting an equal position with other educational staff. This often included suggestions such as “nice treatment”, “good relationships in the workplace”, “not to disparage my work”, “not to feel that I am unwanted”, “not to be treated by teachers as servants”, etc. A somewhat surprising (albeit not too frequent) is assistant teachers’ request to have sufficient information about specific learners and the course of classes. This may indicate a subordinate position of assistant teachers (they do not have access to information) and a lack of time for joint preparation with teachers.

On the contrary, it is not surprising that the second most frequent response was the requirement for a higher salary, stability of the position, increased FTE, and increased subsidy for indirect work. This often includes communication with parents, production of teaching aids, and preparation of learning texts. These activities are often performed in their free time. The financial requirements are often associated with non-financial remuneration of their work.

Interestingly, for assistant teachers it is less important to improve their relationships with parents compared with teachers. This is despite (or maybe because of) the fact that the responses in other questionnaire items indicate that assistant teachers are in a closer and more frequent contact with parents.

Assistant teachers believe that they need further education in order to increase their professional competences more than teachers.

Compared with teachers, assistants are more satisfied with their work situation. Specific examples of their satisfaction include support provided by colleagues and school managers, communicative parents, and learners interested in education. This again confirms that the level of interpersonal relationships strongly influences satisfaction in professional life any may become a crucial factor in the effectiveness of joint education.

The most frequent response (to “What else do you need for your work?”) as suggested by teachers is a decrease in excessive administration. They suggest that the time they spend on administration results in less time devoted to education. More time could also be used for joint lesson preparation with assistant teachers. As teachers suggest, this is also complicated by the low FTE of assistant teachers without sufficient indirect work. Some teachers suggest specific ways of decreasing administration (for example not having to keep the class register in classes where all learners are educated according to individual educational plans and all records are made in special registers kept for each learner). Other teachers believe that excessive administration is associated with unclear and constantly changing legislation and
excessively high demands specified in the framework educational programme. According to some opinions, part of the administration is only for the purposes of the Czech School Inspectorate and has no effect on the teaching process – it does not increase the quality of teaching. Many responses related to the area of teacher remuneration. Teachers demand higher remuneration for their work but also more money for assistant teachers. They believe that social (non-financial) appreciation of their demanding work by fellow teachers and school managers is of equal importance.

Another demand is to decrease the number of children in classes. This relates to an overall decrease (according to teachers it is impossible to maintain an individual approach in a class of 30 children) and a decrease in the number of children with SEN (there are as many as 9 or 11 children with support measures classified 2 to 5 per class). Some sporadic opinions suggest that children with SEN do not belong in mainstream education and that “inclusion is the wrong way”.

Responses of medium urgency included the need to increase the professional competences of assistant teachers; teachers believe that their qualification should be increased and some disagree with the fact that an employee with insufficient qualification performs activities that are difficult even for a university graduate. They also emphasise that cooperation with parents should be improved, teachers should be given more competences in negotiating with parents, and educational conditions should be improved by providing better equipment (aids and more space for individualized teaching).

A less frequent requirement mentioned by teachers is further education. In this area, the demand is met by educational courses implemented by schools, for example by means of the so-called templates. Teachers emphasise that they require high-quality education that meets their specific problems and needs.

A rare requirement concerns an increase in methodological support provided by educational counselling centres. The question is to what extent this is an expression of solidarity of teachers with busy employees of counselling centres and to what extent this is a sign of resignation because these employees have no time for continuous and systematic methodological support of teachers.

Only a negligible number of teachers state that they do not need anything for their job and are satisfied with the current situation.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The results of the survey suggest that educational employees are overwhelmed by administration. In this area it would be desirable if the Ministry of Education adopted measures to reduce the excessive administration. An example could be a system of supporting inclusive education in universities, where administration is controlled by an inclusion coordinator [5]. Such coordinator would surely be useful in elementary schools.

Another interesting outcome is the need to support communication between educational staff. The authors of the present paper would like to propose a support measure that would provide more space for communication. This may for example include mediation training or training in communication techniques and methods. A largely debated issue is the system of supervision in schools.

Good examples are activities and instruments that support an inclusive environment in other types or levels of education. For example in art and music schools an effective tool is the application of non-verbal methods and techniques in education of both students and teachers [6].

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