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Current opinions of Czech teachers about the inclusive form of education

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Abstract

The current curriculum for elementary education in the Czech Republic allows inclusion of pupils with special educational needs in mainstream schools. In spite of the fact that today the right of all persons to education is generally accepted, the inclusive form of education frequently raises various doubts in both the lay and professional community. Various concerns stem from inaccurate ideas of this form of education and insufficient information, particularly in relation to successful delivery of inclusion. In some countries, such as in Great Britain or Finland, the experience with the inclusive form of education is much longer and is mostly positive, in our country however, the concept of inclusion is gaining ground relatively slowly. The quality of educating both the healthy population and pupils with special educational needs is influenced by a number of factors. One of the most significant roles in the educational process is taken by the educator. The educator's role is irreplaceable and is decisive for the degree of success of the development of a child personality. All changes in the educational approaches are related not only to a well thought-out theoretical background but particularly to comprehensive readiness of the principal educational actors, i.e. the teachers. To accomplish this task however, the highest possible amount of information is required. To acquire this information was one of the aims of a research study carried out in the previous year 2014.

Keywords: Czech Republic; inclusive form; education

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1. Introduction

Contemporary research studies of opinions about and attitudes to inclusive education of impaired persons focus on various participants of the educational process, i.e. teachers, pupils, parents, headteachers, counsellors, etc.

The attitudes of teachers, pupils or their parents represent, inter alia, significant specific positive experience with including impaired children in common schools.

For example Jordan et al. (Hajkova & Strnadova, 2010) state that a number of teachers have concerns about inclusive education. The most frequent reason for these doubts is that pupils with special educational needs take the teacher's time that should be devoted to intact pupils, and also that teaching pupils with special educational needs requires special qualifications on the part of the teacher.

2. Research study: objective, research sample, applied method

The main purpose of our research study was to identify and analyse the current opinion spectrum of elementary school teachers about the inclusive form of education.

The objective of the research study way to identify and describe the current state in the area of inclusive education of children with visual or hearing impairment from the perspective of the most significant actors of the educational process – i.e. the teachers. By means of an anonymous questionnaire survey we obtained information from 260 Czech elementary school teachers (specifically from the Olomouc region) and from 60 teacher from Slovenia (from Maribor). The questionnaire was designed in compliance with the research intent by a team of professionals from the Faculty of Education, Palacky University, Olomouc, and contained a total of 22 items. Through the questionnaire we received a relatively vivid overview of the teachers' opinions about various aspects of the inclusive form of education of impaired pupils in mainstream schools.

In both research samples – teachers from the Czech Republic and Slovenia, a majority of respondents were women. Also in terms of experience both samples were comparable, a half of each sample had up to 20 years of teaching experience, the other half over 20 years of experience. The Slovenian sample of teachers was smaller in terms of the number of respondents but it was convenient to use this sample for some comparisons as the educational systems in both countries are similar in many ways. This paper presents selected findings of the research study.

3. Results

Statistical data processing allowed a comparison of the Czech and Slovenian sample of teachers. Table 1 shows the observed significant differences between the groups of teachers in various questionnaire items.

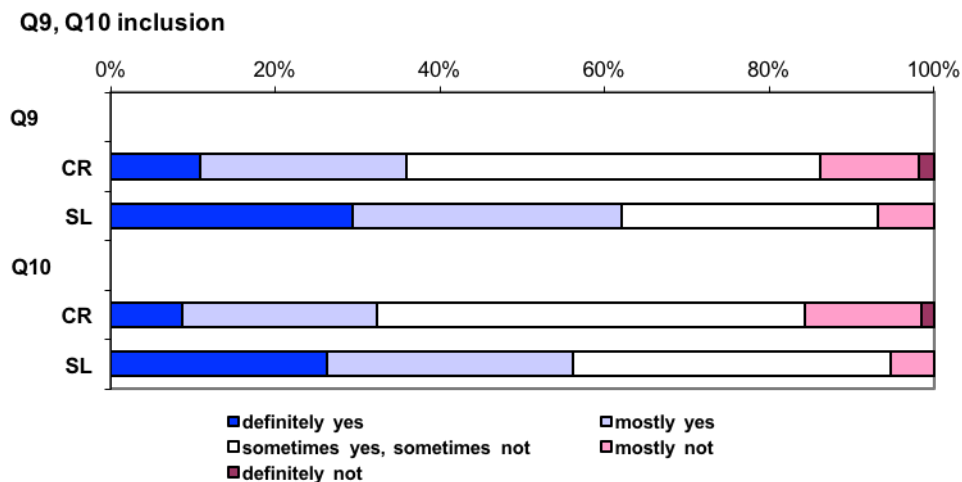
Table 1 Overview of statistical data processing of selected questionnaire items by country

	Test Statistics ^a						
	Q9	Q10	Q15	Q16	Q20	Q21	Q22
Mann-Whitney U	5365.0	5001.0	364.5	935.0	3766.5	3931.5	4285.0
Wilcoxon W	7076.0	6654.0	554.5	1286.0	5536.5	5701.5	5996.0
Z	-3.86	-3.93	-3.428	-.226	-6.160	-6.154	-5.391
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.001	.821	.000	.000	.000

a. Grouping Variable: country

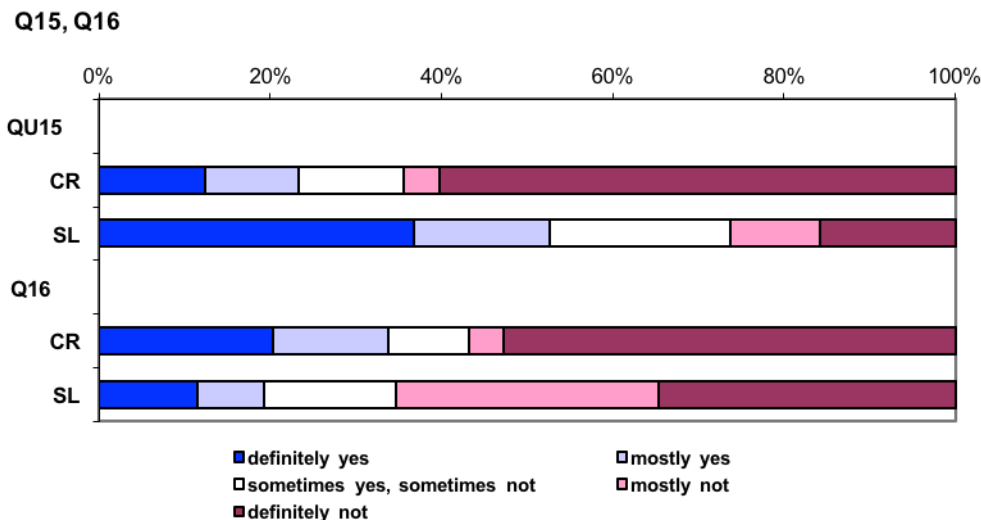
Table 1 and the following graphs indicate that the teachers from both countries vary in their opinions about the effect of the inclusive form of education on pupils with special educational needs; the differences in their answers are highly significant in most items of the questionnaire. For example in assessing the benefit of the inclusive form of education for children with special educational needs (item Q 9), the Slovenian teachers reported considerably higher or more positive assessment of this type of education compared with the Czech group of teachers. An analysis of the difficulties reported by the Czech teachers in using this form of education of impaired pupils resulted in specific arguments. The most frequent ones were too many pupils in a class, lack of assistant teachers, lack of finance and special aids, or insufficient readiness on the part of the teachers.

Another significant difference in favour of the Slovenian teachers was derived from the responses to the question whether they consider the inclusive form of education beneficial for intact pupils (item Q10). Compared with their Czech counterparts, more Slovenian teachers consider this type of education beneficial; the responses of the Czech teachers are dominated by uncertainty. The differences in both items are clearly shown in Graph 1.



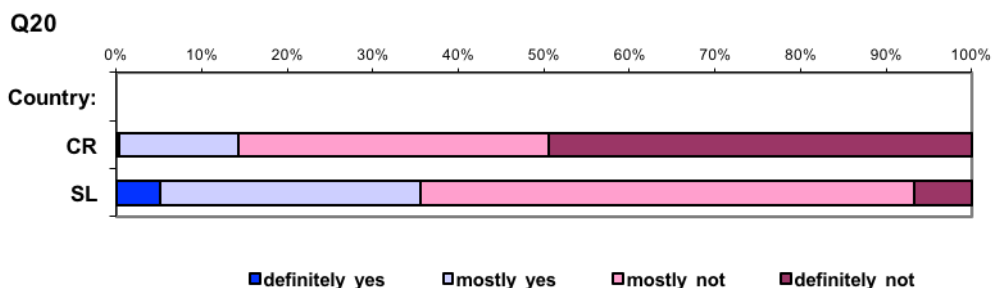
Graph 1 Proportions of responses of Czech and Slovenian teachers to items 9 and 10.

A statistically significant difference was also observed between the teachers of both countries concerning their cooperation with special education centres (SECs) if they have a visually impaired pupil (item Q15), again in favour of the Slovenian sample. The assessment of the Czech teachers was much less positive, often indicating an absence of such cooperation. In terms of the differences in cooperation with SECs in case of a hearing impaired pupil (item Q16), no statistically significant difference was observed. It might be assumed that a certain role was played by more critical assessment of this cooperation in case of a hearing impaired pupil compared with a visually impaired pupil by the Slovenian sample of teachers. The proportions of various responses are shown in Graph 2.



Graph 2 Proportions of responses of Czech and Slovenian teachers to items 15 and 16.

Other significant values concerned the difference in assessing the degree of readiness of teachers for inclusion of a visually or hearing impaired pupil in mainstream schools (item Q 20). The resulting data indicate a significantly more positive opinion about such readiness on the part of the Slovenian teachers (see Table 1 and Graph 3).

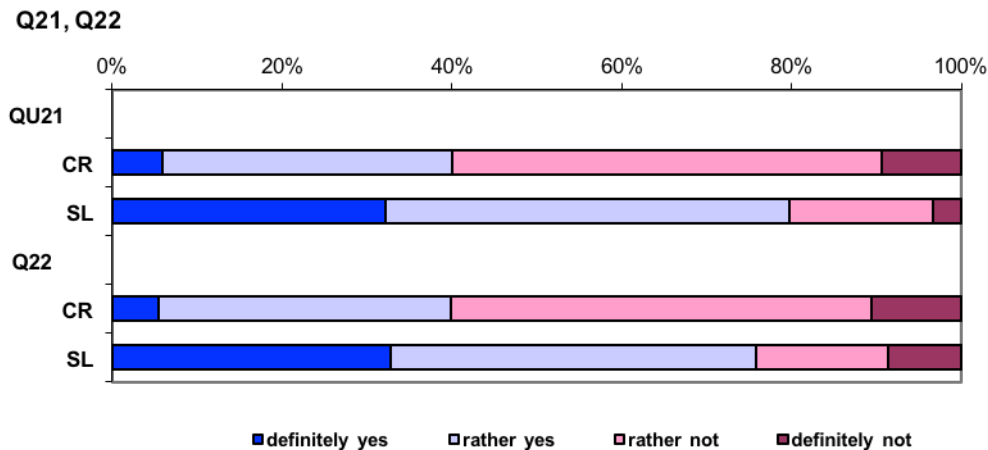


Graph 3 Proportions of responses of Czech and Slovenian teachers to item 20.

The data shown in Graph 3 indicate that the mentioned significant difference is both in the positive assessment of teachers' readiness, which is more visible in the Slovenian teachers, and in the more frequently expressed non-readiness of the Czech teachers to work with a visually or hearing impaired pupil. In this respect, there is also a relatively strong preference of negative response alternatives indicated by the groups of teachers in the compared countries, i.e. the perspectives of the teachers in both countries of their readiness to work children with sensory impairment is quite unsatisfactory.

An analysis of the differences in the teachers' opinions about to including a visually or hearing impaired pupil in their own class (items 21 and 22) again revealed a statistically significant difference

between the monitored groups of teachers in both cases, against the Czech sample of teachers. Our teachers' answers were much more frequently "rather not" and "definitely not", while the Slovenian teachers inclined to the answers of "definitely yes" and "rather yes", as shown in Graph 4.



Graph 4 Proportions of responses of Czech and Slovenian teachers to items 21 and 22.

Further statistically significant differences (at a level of statistical significance of 1%) between the countries related to personal experience with educating pupils with special educational needs. Personal experience was indicated by 43.9% of the Czech respondents, while the Slovenians reported 60.7%; this indicates that the Slovenian teachers are more experienced compared with their Czech counterparts.

The responses to the question about a qualification in educating children with special educational needs during the last two years did not indicate any significant differences. However, there were differences in the presence of teachers to address issues of children with special educational needs in the respondent's school in favour of the Slovenian teachers.

A statistically significant difference was also observed in the comparison of the responses to the question whether the respondent's school is attended by pupils with special educational needs. A significantly bigger proportion of these pupils are in Slovenia.

4. Conclusion

In connection with the currently discussed issue of inclusive education we carried out a comparative study aimed at a comparison of the opinions of Czech and Slovenian elementary school teachers. It appears that Czech teachers have a cautious attitude to the inclusive form of education. Our research findings lead to an assumption that the more positive results of the Slovenian teachers are related to their more extensive experience with the inclusive form of education. The teachers in the Slovenian sample reported more personal experience in working with children with special educational needs as well as more frequent presence of an educator responsible for addressing issues of children with special educational needs in their schools. A significantly higher degree of practical inclusion was observed in Slovenian schools. In the light of our data this specific experience of teachers appears more significant than taking courses or other types of theoretical preparation. This variable did not play a significant role in our research. According to the mentioned results of the performed questionnaire survey aimed at the opinions of elementary school teachers about inclusive education it might be stated that a more positive situation in this respect is in Slovenia. In the area of delivery of the inclusive form of education the Czech system of education should further search for effective ways of influencing teachers, parents and the whole society.

Our results should not be regarded as a criticism of existing efforts to enforce the inclusive form of education at a general level. On the contrary, the results should be used for inspiration and serious consideration in the future. A surprising result was the fact that the teachers in both countries experienced unsatisfactory cooperation with special education centres and other helping institutions. Also, alarming is the large number of teachers reporting insufficient professional erudition to work with children with special educational needs; this was again observed in both countries. The teacher personality influences the effectiveness of education in a crucial way. A teacher who is uncertain and not convinced about the correctness of his/her impact on the pupils has a corresponding attitude. We believe that our results suggest areas for improvement.

Successful inclusion requires the role of the teacher in the context of using the dynamics of a class. As claimed for example by Vagnerova and Klegrova (2008), the teacher is the one who can, to a large extent, contribute to the prevention of exclusion of a pupil from the class and even to the prevention of bullying. In this respect the authors state that children with special educational needs often take the position of a neglected classmate in the class hierarchy. At the same time they emphasise that adopting social skills plays a key role in pupils with special educational needs.

Generally, it can be stated that the teacher-student relationship gradually changes; it becomes less directive and is based on mutual respect and understanding. The inclusive principle of transformation of internal educational procedures in favour of all pupils directly correlates with the mastery learning theory, which requires adaptation of educational conditions, not adaptation on the part of the pupil. (Prucha et al., 2009).

According to our experience, such transformation does not take place easily or quickly. But its positive impact on the development of the personality of each child is indisputable and forms a precondition for the development of the personality of a child with special educational needs. Providing educational opportunities in mainstream schools to pupils with a certain “unlikeness” might be stipulated by the law; however, without teachers who believe in the positive effect of this form of education and deliver such form of education every day, the degree of success is very uncertain.

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