

# Through Drama Therapy Core Processes towards Interdisciplinary Inclusive Education Practice

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**Abstract:** *Increasing heterogeneity of school classrooms inevitably requires an inclusive approach. The paper introduces the perspective on differentness in the context of inclusion of children with difficulties in learning, which are defined based on the need for help rather than an assessed diagnosis. Result analyses of a qualitative research, based on interviews and solving a fictional case, with primary school teachers revealed the deficiencies in inclusive thinking, along with the strengths of interdisciplinary assistive approaches and strategies. The profession of teacher is being transformed towards the role of a helping professional, even though the research results revealed that teachers have not fully accepted this role as yet. The application of drama therapy methods in inclusive education may contribute to increase in acceptance of the varied nature and appreciation of the diversity in classrooms and schools, due to the inherently inclusive nature of the core processes of drama therapy.*

**Keywords:** *approaches of teachers, children with difficulties in learning, core processes in drama therapy, inclusive education, role of teachers*

## Introduction

Primary school classrooms integrate children with learning disabilities, ADHD, behaviour disorders and different physical and mental disabilities. Teachers often say that it is becoming very difficult for them to teach in such diverse classrooms and to meet the individual needs of each child. They complain about being overwhelmed and express the need for particular methodological materials that would help them in everyday classroom situations. We believe that methods in the absence of a comprehensive change to pedagogical thinking are insufficient. In addressing the challenges of diverse classrooms, we start with a research and an analysis of the current state of support approaches that teachers implement on everyday basis. We were interested in understanding the reasons for their choices of helping strategies.

The goal of our research was to explore the assistive approaches used by primary school teachers. The focus was on strategies they propose and adopt when they discover that some children in their classrooms have difficulties in learning. The aim was to understand their concerns over the process, evaluate the professional network from their perspective and to talk about their role in the support process.

## Theoretical background

Diversity in a standard classroom represents a challenge for the teachers. The rising tendency of heterogeneity of the class and the changing needs of the children are being acknowledged. Differentness is often understood as a specific need requiring special support.

However, in the settings characterized by inclusive thinking, diversity represents a benefit. This principle is applicable to the classroom as well as to the society in general. Differentness is normal, thus higher heterogeneity naturally promotes inclusion.

In our research, we focused on analysing teachers' support strategies for children with difficulties in learning. The term 'difficulties in learning' has been chosen purposefully. It contains a wider understanding of the different issues the children might have in meeting the academic requirements. We define difficulties in learning not in terms of a diagnosed category (such as learning disabilities, or ADHD), but by the need for support. The fact that children cannot focus, learn slower, or have not discovered their learning style is a reason for support. From this perspective, setting a diagnosis and creating an individual education plan for the child is not a necessary step before help is offered. The observed need makes the child eligible for receiving help.

Children have the right to learn and to grow up in an enhancing environment. Child development and learning at school happens in a complex system of interrelating factors. The main areas might be seen as composed of: a) *internal factors*, such as functions of the brain; b) *family factors*, including parental raising styles, their attitudes towards education, but also health related and socioeconomic factors; c) *factors of school environment*, including school atmosphere and culture, attitudes and interaction styles of teachers, and relationships with peers.

The system created from these factors can work as a stress factor causing or deepening difficulties in learning for a child. Internal factors include, for example, attention deficits (Bragdon, Gamon, 2006), sensory processing disorders (Kranowitz, 2005), or other partial dysfunctions (Vágnerová, 2004). Family stressors can include hyper-protective, rejecting or abusing parenting styles that cause psychological and learning problems in children (Prevendárová, 1998). Mental health vulnerability of the parents may be a risk factor in the children's academic achievements as well (Pretis, Dimova, 2012). School culture and school climate, as described by Mareš (2003), may negatively influence learning if there is lack of acceptance and if an atmosphere of fear is maintained. For example, from the research of Zelina (2006), 31% of children at primary, secondary and high schools in Slovakia had the experience of being a victim of bullying. Relationships with peers and authorities influence self-esteem among children, which strongly correlates with the academic achievements (Pokorná, 2010).

However, the system can also stand on the side of the child and create a supporting network. Focusing on the strengths, where strengths are considered not only as exceptionally good characteristics but also everything that functions well or 'normally' (Solantaus, 2012), is one of the supportive factors of successful learning. Inclusive thinking in education (Lang, Berberichová, 1998) accepts diversity and leads students (and teachers) towards tolerance of differentness. It is based on holistic approach (Speck, 1998; Bartoňová, 2009), which understands a person as a whole.

Philosophical orientation of a school creates the basis for children with differences, which means for all children. It is the philosophy of the school that transfers into the thinking of teachers and the inclusive/non-inclusive atmosphere. School philosophies are based on theories of education and propose different values. Zelina (2006) spoke about three types of schools: *pragmatic* – focused on employment in praxis; *theoretical* – based on general education as its main value; and *humanistic* – supporting individual development of pupils and building relationships. Humanistic education respects the needs and interests of children,

invests time in discussions and problem solving. In practice, all three approaches are present, with one or the other coming to the forefront at times. Person-centered school creates conditions for all children. It does not appreciate only knowledge but also the holistic education of a human towards goodness.

The traditional process of school education is, according to Kostrub (2008), based on behavioral understanding of learning. The teacher is a presenter of knowledge and the pupil is expected to reproduce the information. Hence, learning requires maximum concentration and reception of contents. This way of learning is not suitable for all students, in many cases it is dysfunctional and “produces” pupils with difficulties in learning. Kostrub (2008) emphasized the need for transitioning towards implementing socio-cognitive theories of learning in school education. According to these theories, cognitive changes in children happen due to interaction and transaction processes. Individual cognitive development happens in a constructive process of internalizing new inputs gained from social interactions. Intrapsychic structures interact with new and more effective interpsychic structures. It means that children can learn best in a creative environment that supports them as they are and prepares the conditions for learning, including accepting atmosphere and supportive relationships. These principles were present already in the pedagogy of Maria Montessori (1998).

In the pedagogy of the oppressed as a part of critical pedagogy, Freire (2009) presented a similar view, although from a sociological perspective. The oppressive position of the teacher in the traditional frontal form of education blocks students from opening up to new knowledge and experience. The unbalanced relationship of a teacher and a student is not based only on the formal authority of the teacher. Power imbalance is established because the teacher is the presenter who knows everything and the student resigns to the position of a passive listener who knows nothing. The teacher is the subject and the student is an object. Teacher superiority and ignorance of student experience is believed to be the core ideology of oppression, in which it is impossible to really learn. Freire (2009), similar to Kostrub (2008), expressed that knowledge is created in exploration, discovering the world and in interaction. If there is lack of opportunities for learners to be creative, they might appear as requiring a specific approach. Discovering and following student’s learning style (Mareš, 1998; Rief & Heimburge, 2006) is crucial and some models of education allow it better than others.

The principles of inclusive education, as we understand it, are also based on salutogenis, a concept of health by Antonovsky (2006), which criticises pathological understanding of illness. This concept can be applied to pedagogy as well. Inclusive thinking means that people/students are not separated into categories of the healthy, normal, intact and the disabled. Inclusion means that everyone has strengths and weaknesses, as Antonovsky (2006) said, health is a continuum. International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) and its version for children and youth ICF-CY create a balance between symptoms and present strengths in participation in life ([www.icf-training.eu](http://www.icf-training.eu)). ICF supports the concept of resilience that is an integral part of inclusive education (Kebza, 2005; Komárik, 2009; Horňáková, 2011).

In our research we were interested to find out whether the principles of inclusive education are present in the thinking of primary school teachers and how inclusion or integration is performed in their everyday practice of providing education in diverse classrooms.

## Research participants

The participants of our research were seven primary school teachers from four different regular primary schools in the capital of Slovakia. Their participation on the research was based on their motivation to talk about their work in classrooms with integrated children. The age of the participants corresponded with the length of their practice. Two participants were younger than 30 years, with practice under 10 years, three participants were less than 40 years old and their practice experience was within 20 years, while two other participants were under 50 years of age and their practice experience was not more than 30 years. All participants were women. Their formal university education was general pedagogy for elementary education.

The schools where the participants were teaching at the time of research had different backgrounds – two schools were general state public schools, one school was focused on language education and one

school was a church established school following the state curriculum. Two of the schools had a special pedagogue present at the school; the other two had only external cooperation with a special education centre. The size of the school was middle (with 6 to 9 primary level classes) in three cases and large (with 17 primary level classes) in one case.

## Research Methodology

Since we were interested in exploring the teachers' individual approaches, decision and executive support strategies that they utilize, the qualitative method was chosen to explore and understand these helping approaches.

The applied methods of data collection included semi-structured interviews with teachers focused on strategies they use in classrooms in order to help children experiencing difficulties. We were interested in their understanding of inclusion, integration, system strategies and individual classroom and teaching strategies as well as cooperation with parents and other professionals. We also asked them to evaluate the importance and quality of external resource/risk factors influencing their work. To simplify this task, we used a part of SWOT analyses with quantifiers (modified from Kováčová, 2010), but in the data analyses we based our conclusions mostly on teachers' comments while thinking about the SWOT analyses. As a third method of data collection, teachers had to solve a fictional case concerning a child and suggest helping strategies based on the described behaviour and symptoms of a child with difficulties. We were interested to see if talking about a simulated situation would bring similar results as to the description of their own experiences.

The data (transcripts of interviews, answers from SWOT analyses and the model case studies) was processed by open and axial coding (Hendl, 2008). Categories of helping approaches were created and analysed afterwards.

## Research results

The identified helping approaches of teachers were focused on various areas: a) *psychological* strategies addressing the children's state of psychological well-being, for example reducing anxiety or supporting self-confidence; b) strategies focused on *social relationships in the classroom* included talks about tolerance and offered situations for experiencing success and social appreciation by the child with difficulties; c) *system/programme* strategies created extra-curricular activities with time for individual attention to children with difficulties; d) *staff* oriented strategies meant suggesting that children attend special education services; e) strategies regarding *classroom organization* were using parts of cooperative learning, because children with difficulties had to sit together with well-achieving students; teachers mostly used f) strategies *oriented on the performance of the child* with difficulties, such as paying individual attention, having lower requirements or keeping demands; the last category was focused on g) *process of learning* of a child with difficulties, for example, conditioning, motivation, control or supporting independence.

These strategies were the result of teachers' personal professional experience. They expressed that they were not always sure if they are applying the correct strategy. Teachers do not feel prepared for this task also because their formal education did not include special education principles and practices. As a supportive factor, studying in external form (while already working at a school) was considered very positive, because it offered the opportunity of confronting the problems of everyday practice and to consult with the professors. Also, experience from working at an alternative school provided a teacher with strategies useful in a diverse classroom.

The research results also showed that teachers perceive their role only as educators in the narrow term of teaching. Helping children with difficulties is seen as outside their professional competence, as a responsibility of specialized professionals and parents. These findings are not in accordance with the inclusive

principles and requirements of current classrooms where a teacher has the role of a helping professional (Lazarová, 2008).

## Conclusions

Pedagogical thinking and helping approaches of teachers are based on their experience and lack theoretical and methodological background. Teachers use some effective support strategies, but in general their approaches are based on the philosophy of integration of children with diagnosed disorders. Inclusive education is supported at the level of social interactions among children in the classroom, but it is not present in self-reported teaching strategies and helping approaches of teachers.

## Discussion

In our research, we discovered the need for teachers for practical strategies that would help them implement inclusive education in their classrooms. Therapeutic approaches of drama therapy and other creative arts therapies are inclusive in their core and thus education methods derived from these might offer the desired tools.

Teachers suppose the solution to be in tangible methodological materials. Even though we agree that ready-to-use products are necessary for quality education, we propose that the philosophy of education precedes methods and techniques.

An understanding of the inclusive principles and possessing them as internalized attitudes are strong conditions of supportive helping approach. Introducing therapeutic principles into education promotes child-centeredness and increases opportunities for all children, including those with difficulties in learning. It could be argued that introducing therapeutic factors into education is unnecessary or redundant. We would agree with this if pedagogical principles were fully following the needs of all children in diverse classrooms. Practice reveals that there are certain gaps in inclusive practices. Thus we suggest applying psychotherapy principles in educational settings that will support children's development holistically.

The following table (Tab. 1) shows the effective factors in psychotherapy described by Hanušová (2004) and their application in school settings. The factors that function in therapy are similar to the factors that support learning if we consider pupils holistically as children with their bio-psycho-social and spiritual dimensions influencing and allowing the learning process in its entirety.

**Tab. 1:** Effective factors of psychotherapy and their application in school settings

In psychotherapy (Hanušová, 2004)	In school settings
General effective factors – situation – personality of therapist – personality of client – relationship of therapist and client – group dynamics	– school profile, school culture, atmosphere in the classroom (Mareš, 2003; Zelina, 2006) – teacher personality, teacher role (Lazarová, 2008), teacher self-efficacy (Gavora, 2009) – student personality, motivation – relationships between teacher and student – interaction style – relationships in classroom, tolerance/in-tolerance
Specific effective factors – depend on particular therapy approach – changes in cognitive, emotional, action, physical and relational area	– theories of education and their application in particular methods

Choosing an example from the field of expressive therapies, we will demonstrate the therapeutic education overlaps on the example of effective factors in drama therapy. They were defined by Jones (2007) as drama therapy core processes. They are valid across different drama therapy approaches. They include projection

into the story of a hero, empathy and aesthetic distance achieved by a metaphor, role play and personification, interactive audience and the presence of a witness, embodiment, play, and the connection of drama and everyday reality that allows transformation.

These processes are used to achieve therapeutic change. They are healing in nature and they are used purposefully in therapy. Many of their parts appear in education situations as well. Often, their potential is not realized or recognized. They are not fully used. Sometimes, their existence is even suppressed or their power used to humiliate students. On the one hand, for example, children do get some opportunities to speak about their feelings associated with the literature they are reading and projecting on, or the feedback of the classroom teacher changes from a witness to an accusatory, or the movement of children in the classroom applying embodied strategies is considered misbehaviour. On the other, being aware of the value of these processes may lead to the supportive practice of inclusive education. Drama therapy is inherently inclusive and applying some of its principles may lead to higher acceptance of the differentness and appreciation of diversity in the classroom. It can create space for expression by offering expression in appropriate situations. It supports different learning styles, also the kinaesthetic learners that will benefit from embodied activities. The close association of emotionality and rationality is another benefit of applying therapeutic concepts in education.

Other benefits of therapeutic principles in education include the fact that there is no need for modification for children with special needs because they already are inclusive in their nature. The use of therapeutically oriented strategies is in accordance with the layered education curriculum concepts (Rief, Heimburge, 2006; Duggan et al., 2009) and individual approach that teachers also in our research proclaimed.

As the research results suggest, the challenges in implementing inclusive education in practice still exist, including the need for partner communication with parents and other professionals of a team. We believe that a change of pedagogical thinking towards acceptance of therapeutic principles as part of the education process may support inclusive practice and help children in need. Therapeutic and education processes are interconnected and influence one another. Their relation is important especially during childhood, because a child is a whole person, not only a pupil. We wish to explore the connections of therapeutic and education processes in future research and we invite professionals and researchers to join us.

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