

CEZ DRAMATOTERAPEUTICKÉ KLÚČOVÉ PROCESY SMEROM K INTERDISCIPLINÁRNEJ PRAXI INKLUZÍVNEJ EDUKÁCIE THROUGH DRAMA THERAPY CORE PROCESSES TOWARDS INTERDISCIPLINARY INCLUSIVE EDUCATION PRACTICE

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Abstrakt: Zvyšujúca sa heterogenita školských tried si nevyhnutne žiada inkluzívny prístup. Príspevok predkladá pohľad na odlišnosť v kontexte inklúzie detí s ťažkosťami v učení sa, ktoré definuje na základe potreby pomoci, a nie stanovenej diagnózy. Analýza výsledkov kvalitatívneho výskumu, postaveného na rozhovoroch a riešení fiktívneho prípadu, s učiteľmi primárneho stupňa vzdelávania odhalila nedostatky v inkluzívnom myslení, ale aj silné stránky interdisciplinárnych pomáhajúcich prístupov a stratégií. Profesia učiteľa sa transformuje smerom k role pomáhajúceho pracovníka, hoci výsledky výskumu ukázali, že učitelia túto rolu zatiaľ plne neprijímajú. Aplikácia dramatoterapeutických metód v inkluzívnej edukácii môže prispieť k zvýšeniu akceptácie odlišnosti a k oceneniu diverzity v triede a v škole, a to vďaka inherentne inkluzívnej povahe kľúčových procesov v dramatoterapii.

Abstract: Increasing heterogeneity of school classrooms inevitably requires inclusive approach. The paper introduces a 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 qualitative research, based on interviews and solving a fictional case, with primary school teachers, revealed deficiencies in inclusive thinking, but also strengths of interdisciplinary helping approaches and strategies. Teacher profession is being transformed towards the role of a helping professional, even though the research results revealed that teachers have not fully accepted this role yet. Application of drama therapy methods in inclusive education may contribute to an increase in acceptance of differentness and appreciation of diversity in classroom and school, due to inherently inclusive nature of core processes in drama therapy.

KLúčové slová: deti s ťažkosťami v učení sa, inkluzívna edukácia, kľúčové procesy v dramatoterapii, prístupy učiteľa, rola učiteľa

Key words: 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 individual needs of each child. They complain about being overwhelmed and express a need for particular methodological materials that would help them in everyday classroom situations. We believe that methods without a complete change in 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 an everyday basis. We were interested in understanding the reasons of their choices of helping strategies.

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

Theoretical background

Diversity in the regular classroom represents a challenge for the teachers. They observe a rising tendency in the heterogeneity of the class and changing needs of children. Differentness is often understood as a specific need requiring special support.

However, in settings characterized by inclusive thinking, diversity represents a benefit. This principle of is applicable to the classroom as well as to the society in general. Differentness is normal, thus a 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 different issues 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 of 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 educational 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 a 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 the peers.

The system created from these factors can work as a stressor 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 of children (Prevendárová, 1998). Mental health vulnerability of parents may be a risk factor in 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 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 children self-esteem, which highly correlates with academic achievements of students (Pokorná, 2010).

However, the system can also stand on the side of the child and create a supporting network. Focusing on strengths, where strengths are considered not only 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 a 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) talked 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 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 holistic education of a human towards goodness.

Traditional process of school education is, according to Kostrub (2008), based on behavioral understanding of learning. Teacher is a presenter of knowledge and 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 of 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 conditions for learning, including accepting atmosphere and supportive relationships. These principles were present already in the pedagogy of Maria Montessori (1998).

In pedagogy of the oppressed as a part of critical pedagogy, Freire (2009) presented a similar view, although from a sociological perspective. Oppressive position of the teacher in traditional frontal form of education blocks students from opening 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. The power unbalance is established because teacher is the presenter who knows everything and student resigns into a 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 of ideology of oppression, in which it is impossible to really learn. Freire (2009) similarly to Kostrub (2008) expressed that knowledge is created in exploration, discovering the world and in interaction. If there is a lack of opportunities for learners to create their own constructs, 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.

Principles of inclusive education, as we understand it, are also based on salutogenesis, 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). 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 if the principles of inclusive education are present in the thinking of primary school teachers and how inclusion or integration is performed in their everyday praxis of providing education in diverse classrooms.

Research participants

Participants of our research were seven primary level 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 year, with practice under 10 years, three participants were less than 40 years old and their practice was within 20 years and two participants were under 50 years of age and their practice 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 background – two schools were general state public schools, one school was focused on language education and one school was a church established school following a 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 teachers' individual approaches, decision and executive support strategies that they utilize, qualitative methodology was chosen to explore and understand these helping approaches.

Applied methods of data collection included semi-structured interviews with teachers focused on strategies they use in classrooms in order to help children who are 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 of a child and suggest helping strategies based on described behaviour and symptoms of a child with difficulties. We were interested to see if talking about a pretend situation would bring similar results to the description of their own experience.

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

Identified helping approaches of teachers were focused on various areas: a) *psychological* strategies were attending 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 a result of teachers' personal professional experience. They expressed that they were not always sure if they are applying a 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 an encounter with problems of everyday practice and a chance 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 a narrow term of teaching. Helping children with difficulties is seen as outside of their professional competence, as a responsibility of specialized professionals and parents. These findings are not in accordance with inclusive principles and requirements of current classrooms where a teacher has a role of a helping professional (Lazarová, 2008).

Conclusions

Pedagogical thinking and helping approaches of teachers are based on their experience and lack a 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 on the level of social interactions among children in the classroom but is not present in self-reported teaching strategies and helping approaches of teachers.

Discussion

In our research, we discovered the need of 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 educational methods derived from these might offer the desired tools.

Teachers suppose the solution is 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.

Understanding of inclusive principles and possessing them as internalized attitudes are strong conditions of a supportive helping approach. Introducing therapeutic principles into education promotes child-centeredness and increases opportunities of all children also children 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. The 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.

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

Tab. 1 Effective factors of psychotherapy and their application to school settings

In psychotherapy (Hanusová, 2004)		In school settings
<p>General effective factors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - situation - personality of therapist - personality of client - relationship of therapist and client - group dynamics 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 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
<p>Specific effective factors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - depend on particular therapy approach - changes in cognitive, emotional, action, physical and relational area 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - theories of education and their application in particular methods

Choosing an example from the field of expressive therapies, we will demonstrate the therapeutic educational 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 a story of a hero, empathy and aesthetic distance achieved by metaphor, role play and personification, interactive audience and 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 and they are used purposefully in therapy. Many of their parts appear in educational 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 one hand, for example, children do get any opportunities to speak about their feelings connected with the literature they are reading and projecting on, or the feedback of the classroom teacher changes from a witness into an accusatory, or the movement of children in the classroom applying embodied strategies is considered misbehaviour. On the other hand, being aware of the value of these processes may lead into a supportive practice of inclusive education. Drama therapy is inherently inclusive. Application of some of its principles may lead to a higher acceptance of 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. Connection of emotionality and rationality is another benefit of applying therapeutic concepts in education.

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

As the research results suggested, challenges in implementing inclusive education practices still exist, including the need for partner communication with parents and other professionals on a team. We believe that a change of pedagogical thinking towards acceptance of therapeutic principles as a part of educational process may support inclusive practice and help children in need. Therapeutic and educational 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 educational processes in future research and we invite professionals and researchers to join us.

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