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SLOVO NA ÚVOD

Vážení a ctení čitateľa,

vítame Vás pri čítaní tretieho, mimoriadneho čísla 14. ročníka medzinárodného vedeckého recenzovaného časopisu *Štúdie zo špeciálnej pedagogiky/Studies in Special education*, ktorý vychádza pravidelne vo Vydavateľstve Prešovskej univerzity v Prešove na Slovensku. Časopis je registrovaný v medzinárodných databázach vedeckých časopisov – ERIH PLUS (European Reference Index for the Humanities and Social Sciences) v Nórsku a CEEOL (Central and Eastern European Online Library) v Nemecku, ako aj v Slovenskom národnom korpuse Jazykovedného ústavu Ľudovíta Štúra Slovenskej akadémie vied v Bratislave na Slovensku. Publikovanie všetkých recenzovaných príspevkov v časopise a ich zverejnenie na webovom sídle časopisu (www.studiezospecialnejpedagogiky.sk) podlieha písomnému súhlasu autorov, čo je v súlade s nariadením Európskeho parlamentu a Rady EÚ 2016/679 o ochrane fyzických osôb pri spracúvaní osobných údajov a o voľnom pohybe takýchto údajov a zákonom č. 18/2018 Z. z., o ochrane osobných údajov a o zmene a doplnení niektorých zákonov (GDPR). Všetky doteraz publikované čísla časopisu sú zverejnené v archíve na webovom sídle časopisu: www.studiezospecialnejpedagogiky.sk, ako aj na internete: <https://www.ceeol.com/search/journal-detail?id=2440>.

Mimoriadne číslo vedeckého časopisu je publikačným výstupom z vedeckého sympózia **International Visegrad Project ID 22420073 “Structures of Uncertainty: Inclusive Education in Central and Eastern European Countries,”** ktorý sa konal online v dňoch 17. – 18. 11. 2025, jeho organizátorom bola Prešovská univerzita v Prešove na Slovensku. V časopise Vám ponúkame teoretické aj výskumné príspevky so zameraním na aktuálne inkluzívne trendy v starostlivosti o osoby so špeciálnymi výchovno-vzdelávacími potrebami,¹ ktoré boli prezentované v rámci štyroch tematických oblastí reprezentujúcich štyri krajiny riešiteľov – Slovensko, Česko, Maďarsko a Poľsko. V rubrike **Teoretické a vedeckovýskumné štúdie** v tomto čísle časopisu prezentujeme trinásť originálnych príspevkov² zoradených do pôvodných sekcií, v rámci ktorých boli príspevky prezentované a ktoré boli predmetom aj zaujímavej diskusie.

¹ Teoretické a vedeckovýskumné štúdie v tomto čísle časopisu recenzovali: doc. Mgr. Tatiana Dubayová, PhD.; doc. PaedDr. Bibiána Hlebová, PhD.; doc. PaedDr. Ivana Rochovská, PhD., Marija Čolić, Ph.D., BCBA-D, LBA; Robin Elizabeth Moyher, Ph.D., BCBA-D, LBA; Mgr. Ivana Trellová, Ph.D., BCBA; Mgr. Patrícia Mirdaliková, PhD.; Mgr. Zuzana Bednáríková.

² Za jazykovú stránku príspevkov sú zodpovední ich autori.

V sekcii č. 1 pod názvom ***Inkluzívne prístupy vo výchove a vzdelávaní detí a študentov so špeciálnymi výchovno-vzdelávacími potrebami na Slovensku*** boli prezentované štyri príspevky. Autorky prvého príspevku (*B. Hlebová, Z. Bednáriková*) sa sústredili na kľúčové strategické dokumenty a národné projekty ako legislatívne a pragmatické východiská podporujúce inkluzívny prístup vo výchove a vzdelávaní detí a študentov so zdravotným a/alebo sociálnym znevýhodnením (najmä z marginalizovaných rómskych komunit) na Slovensku od roku 2009 po súčasnosť. Autorky druhého príspevku (*T. Dubayová, H. Hafičová*) prezentovali zaujímavé výsledky vlastného výskumu, ktorý bol realizovaný v rámci implementácie mentoringu pre žiakov prvého až tretieho ročníka vo vybraných stredných odborných školách v Prešovskom samosprávnom kraji, ktorého ambíciou bolo zvýšiť nielen školskú úspešnosť, ale aj subjektívnu pohodu a kvalitu života všetkých žiakov. Autorky tretieho príspevku (*D. Molčanová, B. Hlebová*) sa zamerali na problematiku fonemického uvedomovania ako kľúčového faktora v procese rozvoja ranej čitateľskej gramotnosti. Ich cieľom bolo prezentovať možnosti stimulácie a rozvoja fonemického uvedomovania detí predškolského veku zo sociálne znevýhodneného prostredia v podmienkach inkluzívneho vzdelávania. Autorku štvrtého príspevku (*J. Kožárovú*) zaujal koncept personalizovaného kurikula ako strategického rámca pre rozvoj inkluzívneho vzdelávania, najmä pri riešení rozmanitých potrieb žiakov so špeciálnymi výchovno-vzdelávacími potrebami, a to na základe komparatívnej analýzy kurikulárnych modelov v Českej republike a Švédsku.

V sekcii č. 2 pod názvom ***Inklúzia v českom školstve, stručný prehľad inkluzívnych metodických prístupov z posledných výskumov*** boli prezentované tri príspevky. Autori prvého príspevku (*A. Daněk, D. Šafránková*) skúmali inkluzívne hudobné vzdelávanie cez prizmu dlhodobého kvalitatívneho výskumu realizovaného v sociálne a vzdelanostne marginalizovaných prostrediach. Ich analýza čerpá z dvoch prepojených oblastí: hudobného a sociálneho programu El Sistema a empirickej práce v oblasti ústavnej starostlivosti o deti. Autorka druhého príspevku (*M. Karkošová*) sa zaoberala problematikou starších dospelých nad 75 rokov a prekážkami, ktoré obmedzujú ich zapájanie do sociálnych a komunitných aktivít, najmä v súvislosti s digitálnymi technológiami. Cieľom tejto štúdie bolo preskúmať vnímané sociálne prekážky medzi staršími dospelými so zameraním na rodové rozdiely a úlohu vnímaných technologických prekážok. Autor tretieho príspevku (*F. Vlach*) sa zaoberal problematikou inklúzie v kontexte výkonu trestu odňatia slobody v Českej republike, so zameraním najmä na zraniteľné skupiny väzňov a ochranu ich ľudskej dôstojnosti.

V sekcii č. 3 pod názvom ***Inklúzia v maďarskom vyššom vzdelávaní*** boli prezentované tri príspevky. Autorka prvého príspevku (*M. Nemes*) sa zaoberala reguláciou výučby cudzích jazykov na maďarských vysokých školách a otázkami súvisiacimi so skúškami z cudzích jazykov. Jej cieľom bolo zabezpečiť efektívnu výučbu cudzích jazykov na vysokých školách a výučbu jazykov zameranú na konkrétne predmety, najmä v prípade študentov so zdravotným postihnutím. Autorka druhého príspevku (*K. Mező*) poukázala na problém v maďarskom verejnom vzdelávacom systéme, ktorým je výučba dejepisu vo vyšších ročníkoch základnej školy, spojená s očakávaniami pre žiakov s poruchami učenia. Cieľom realizovaného prieskumu bolo predstaviť hlavné faktory, ktoré bránia a ovplyvňujú výučbu dejepisu u žiakov so špecifickými poruchami učenia. Autorka tretieho príspevku (*E. Balázs-Földi*) poukázala na problém pripravenosti a úlohy učiteľov v integrovanom vzdelávaní žiakov so špeciálnymi výchovno-vzdelávacími potrebami, pričom jej výskumné zameranie sa sústreďuje aj na perspektívu rodičov.

V sekcii č. 4 pod názvom ***Riešenia v oblasti vysokého školstva pre vytvorenie inkluzívnej spoločnosti v Poľsku*** boli prezentované tri príspevky. Autorka prvého príspevku (*D. Prysak*) prezentovala ciele medzinárodného výskumného projektu „Štruktúry neistoty: inkluzívne vzdelávanie v krajinách strednej a východnej Európy,“ ktorý sa realizuje v rokoch 2024 až 2027. Hlavným koordinátorom Visegrádskeho projektu je Sliezska univerzita v Katowiciach v spolupráci s tromi medzinárodnými partnermi: Prešovskou univerzitou v Prešove na Slovensku, Univerzitou v Debrecíne v Maďarsku a Ambis univerzitou v Českej republike. Cieľom projektu je vykonať komparatívnu analýzu štruktúr neistoty súvisiacich s implementáciou inkluzívneho vzdelávania a posilniť úlohu medzinárodnej spolupráce pri propagácii konceptu inklúzie v krajinách strednej a východnej Európy. Autorka druhého príspevku (*A. Stefanow*) prezentovala kritickú analýzu poľských právnych predpisov upravujúcich vzdelávanie študentov so zdravotným postihnutím v rámci vzdelávacieho systému. Analýza bola vykonaná z perspektívy kritickej pedagogiky a zameriavala sa na vybrané analytické kategórie vrátane subjektivity študentov so zdravotným postihnutím, prístupu k inkluzívnemu vzdelávaniu, foriem vzdelávacej podpory a mechanizmov vzdelávacieho výberu a segregácie. Výsledky analýzy poukazujú na výrazný nesúlad medzi zásadami rovnosti, inklúzie a subjektivity študentov deklarovanými v školskom práve a spôsobom, akým sú inštitucionálne implementované. Autorka tretieho príspevku (*M. Tandt-Nowak*) skúmala vývoj inkluzívneho vzdelávania vo Francúzsku z právneho, inštitucionálneho a etického hľadiska. Pôvodne orientovaná na postih a integráciu sa francúzska

vzdelávacia politika postupne presunula k inkluzívnej paradigme založenej na prístupnosti, rovnosti a participácii všetkých študentov.

Tretie číslo vedeckého časopisu *Štúdie zo špeciálnej pedagogiky/ Studies in Special Education* uzatvárajú dve recenzie aktuálnych zahraničných knižných titulov a prezentácia dvoch knižných novínok z roku 2025. V závere by sme sa chceli poďakovať všetkým autorom za ich hodnotné príspevky do tohto mimoriadneho čísla časopisu.

Bibiána Hlebová³
editorka

³ Bibiána Hlebová, doc., PaedDr., PhD., Prešovská univerzita v Prešove, Pedagogická fakulta, Katedra špeciálnej pedagogiky, Ul. 17. novembra 15, 080 01 Prešov, Slovenská republika (<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8366-8281>). E-mail: bibiana.hlebova@unipo.sk. Osobné údaje zverejnené s písomným súhlasom šéfredaktorky.

EDITORIAL

Dear and esteemed readers,

welcome to the thirf, special issue of the 14th year of the international peer-reviewed scientific journal *Studies in Special Education*, published regularly by the University of Prešov Publishing House in Prešov, Slovakia. The journal is indexed in the international databases of scholarly journals – ERIH PLUS (European Reference Index for the Humanities and Social Sciences) in Norway and CEEOL (Central and Eastern European Online Library) in Germany, as well as in the Slovak National Corpus of the Ľudovít Štúr Institute of Linguistics of the Slovak Academy of Sciences in Bratislava, Slovakia. The publication of all peer-reviewed articles in the journal and their publication on the journal's website (www.studiezospecialnejpedagogiky.sk) is subject to the written consent of the authors, in accordance with Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data and Act No. 18/2018 Coll. on the Protection of Personal Data and on the Amendment and Supplement to Certain Acts (GDPR). All issues of the magazine published to date are available on the magazine's website at www.studiezospecialnejpedagogiky.sk, as well as on the Internet at <https://www.cceol.com/search/journal-detail?id=2440>.

This special issue of the scientific journal is the outcome of the scientific symposium **International Visegrad Project ID 22420073 "Structures of uncertainty: inclusive education in Central and Eastern European countries,"** which took place online on November 17–18, 2025, at the University of Prešov in Prešov, Slovakia and offers theoretical and research contributions from the field of special education and related disciplines. The contributions focus on current trends in the care of people with special educational needs, ⁴ which were presented within four thematic areas representing the four countries of the researchers – Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland. In the ***Theoretical and Scientific Research Studies*** section of this issue of the journal, we present 13 original contributions, ⁵ arranged into the original sections in which they were presented, and which were also the subject of an interesting discussion.

⁴ The theoretical and research studies included in this issue were reviewed by: assoc. prof. Tatiana Dubayová, PhD.; assoc. prof. Dr. PaedDr. Bibiána Hlebová, PhD.; assoc. prof. Dr. Ivana Rochovská, PhD., Marija Čolić, Ph.D., BCBA-D, LBA; Robin Elizabeth Moyher, Ph.D., BCBA-D, LBA; Ivana Trellová, PhD., BCBA; Patrícia Mirdalíková, PhD.; Zuzana Bednáriková.

⁵ The authors of the contributions are responsible for the linguistic aspects.

Four papers were presented in Section 1, titled "***Inclusive Approaches in the Education and Training of Children and Students with Special Educational Needs in Slovakia.***" The authors of the first paper (*B. Hlebová, Z. Bednáriková*) examined key strategic documents and national projects as legislative and pragmatic foundations for an inclusive approach to the education and training of children and students with health and/or social disadvantages (especially from marginalised Roma communities) in Slovakia from 2009 to the present. The authors of the second contribution (*T. Dubayová, H. Hafíčová*) presented interesting findings from their own research, which was carried out as part of the implementation of mentoring for first- to third-year students in selected secondary vocational schools in the Prešov Self-Governing Region, intending to increase not only school success but also the subjective well-being and quality of life of all students. The authors of the third contribution (*D. Molčanová, B. Hlebová*) focused on phonemic awareness as a key factor in the development of early reading literacy. Their goal was to present possibilities for stimulating and developing phonemic awareness in preschool children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds in inclusive education settings. The author of the fourth contribution (*J. Kožárová*) examined the concept of a personalised curriculum as a strategic framework for the development of inclusive education, particularly in addressing the diverse needs of students with special educational needs, through a comparative analysis of curricular models in the Czech Republic and Sweden.

In Section 2, entitled "***Inclusion in Czech Education: A Brief Overview of Inclusive Methodological Approaches from Recent Research,***" three papers were presented. The authors of the first contribution (*A. Daněk, D. Šafránková*) examined inclusive music education through the lens of long-term qualitative research conducted in socially and educationally marginalised environments. Their analysis draws on two interrelated areas: the El Sistema music and social programme and empirical work in institutional childcare. The author of the second contribution (*M. Karkošová*) addressed older adults aged 75 and over and the barriers that limit their participation in social and community activities, particularly in relation to digital technologies. This study aimed to examine the perceived social barriers among older adults, focusing on gender differences and the role of perceived technological barriers. The author of the third contribution (*F. Vlach*) addressed inclusion in the context of imprisonment in the Czech Republic, focusing on vulnerable prisoner groups and the protection of their human dignity.

Three papers were presented in Section 3, titled "***Inclusion in Hungarian Higher Education.***" The author of the first paper (*M. Nemes*) examined the regulation of foreign language teaching at Hungarian universities and issues

related to foreign language examinations. Her goal was to ensure effective foreign-language teaching at universities and subject-specific language instruction, especially for students with disabilities. The author of the second contribution (*K. Mező*) highlighted a problem in the Hungarian public education system, namely the teaching of history in the upper grades of elementary school, combined with expectations for students with learning disabilities. The survey aimed to present the main factors that hinder and influence the teaching of history to pupils with specific learning disabilities. The author of the third contribution (*E. Balázs-Földi*) highlighted the preparedness and role of teachers in the integrated education of pupils with special educational needs, while her research also focuses on parents' perspectives.

Three papers were presented in Section 4, titled **"Higher Education Solutions for Creating an Inclusive Society in Poland."** The author of the first contribution (*D. Prysak*) outlined the objectives of the international research project "Structures of Uncertainty: Inclusive Education in Central and Eastern European Countries," which will be implemented between 2024 and 2027. The lead coordinator of the Visegrad project is the University of Silesia in Katowice, in cooperation with three international partners: the University of Prešov in Prešov in Slovakia, the University of Debrecen in Hungary, and Ambis University in the Czech Republic. The project aims to conduct a comparative analysis of the structures of uncertainty related to the implementation of inclusive education and to strengthen the role of international cooperation in promoting the concept of inclusion in Central and Eastern European countries. The author of the second paper (*A. Stefanow*) presented a critical analysis of Polish legislation regulating the education of students with disabilities within the education system. The analysis was conducted from a critical pedagogical perspective and focused on selected analytical categories, including the subjectivity of students with disabilities, access to inclusive education, forms of educational support, and mechanisms of academic selection and segregation. The results of the analysis point to a significant discrepancy between the principles of equality, inclusion, and students' subjectivity as declared in school law and their institutional implementation. The author of the third contribution (*M. Tandt-Nowak*) examined the development of inclusive education in France from a legal, institutional, and ethical perspective. Initially focused on punishment and integration, French education policy has gradually shifted towards an inclusive paradigm based on accessibility, equality, and participation for all students.

The third issue of the scientific journal *Štúdie zo špeciálnej pedagogiky/Studies in Special Education* concludes with two reviews of recent foreign publications and a presentation of two new books from 2025. Finally, we would like to thank all authors for their valuable contributions to this special issue of the journal.

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Section 1:

INCLUSIVE APPROACHES IN THE EDUCATION AND TRAINING OF CHILDREN AND STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS IN SLOVAKIA

LEGISLATIVE AND PRAGMATIC STARTING POINTS OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION OF CHILDREN AND STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS IN SLOVAKIA¹

Legislatívne a pragmatické východiská inkluzívneho vzdelávania detí a študentov so špeciálnymi výchovno-vzdelávacími potrebami na Slovensku

Bibiána Hlebová,² Zuzana Bednáríková³

Abstract: This paper aims to highlight key strategic documents and national projects as legislative and pragmatic starting points for promoting an inclusive approach to the education and training of children and students with health and/or social disadvantages (especially from marginalised Roma communities) in Slovakia from 2009 to the present. The contribution is an overview study and, within the framework of the International Visegrad Project ID 22420073, is a theoretical basis for conducting our own research focusing on the acceptance of legislative documents and the fulfilment of the objectives of national projects in pedagogical practice in the conditions of kindergartens, primary, secondary, and higher education institutions in Slovakia. The paper concludes by formulating research problems, the solutions to which will focus on identifying uncertainties and barriers, which must be overcome in the process of improving the school success of children and students with health and/or social disadvantages in the context of inclusion in Slovakia.

Key words: school inclusion, children and students with special educational needs, health and/or social disadvantage, marginalised Roma communities, strategic documents, national projects, Slovakia.

Abstrakt: Cieľom príspevku je poukázať na kľúčové strategické dokumenty a národné projekty ako legislatívne a pragmatické východiská na podporu inkluzívneho prístupu vo výchove a vzdelávaní detí a študentov so zdravotným a/alebo sociálnym znevýhodnením (najmä z marginalizovaných rómskych komún) na Slovensku od roku 2009 po súčasnosť. Príspevok je prehľadovou štúdiou a v rámci medzinárodného projektu Visegrad ID 22420073 predstavuje teoretický základ na realizáciu nášho vlastného výskumu zameraného na akceptáciu legislatívnych dokumentov a plnenie cieľov národných projektov v pedagogickej praxi v podmienkach materských, základných, stredných a vysokých škôl na Slovensku. V závere príspevku sú formulované výskumné otázky, ktorých riešenie sa zameriava na identifikáciu nieistôt a bariér, ktoré je potrebné prekonať v procese zlepšovania školských výsledkov detí a študentov so zdravotným a/alebo sociálnym znevýhodnením v kontexte inklúzie na Slovensku.

Kľúčové slová: školská inklúzia, deti a žiaci so špeciálnymi vzdelávacími potrebami, zdravotné a/alebo sociálne znevýhodnenie, marginalizované rómske komunity, strategické dokumenty, národné projekty, Slovensko.

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Introduction

In accordance with the strategic documents of the European Union, the Council of Europe, the OECD, the WHO, and UNESCO, the Slovak Republic is striving to gradually introduce an inclusive approach to the education and training of children and students with special educational needs. Recently, the issue of improving the school success of children and students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (especially from marginalised Roma communities) in inclusive settings has come to the fore in Slovakia.

Socially disadvantaged environments do not sufficiently stimulate the development of these children's mental, volitional, and emotional characteristics, do not support their socialisation, and do not provide them with sufficient appropriate stimuli for personality development. Although their education requires special pedagogical approaches, over the past decade, conditions have been created in Slovakia for their inclusive education in mainstream schools (School Act No. 245/2008).⁴ Despite this, the European Commission filed a lawsuit with the Court of Justice of the European Union (on April 19, 2023),⁵ that Slovakia "is not effectively addressing the issue of segregation of children of Roma origin in education and is not complying with EU rules on racial equality (Directive 2000/43/EC,⁶ which prohibits discrimination based on ethnic origin in key areas of life, including education). The complaint also states that in Slovakia, children of Roma origin are often placed in special schools for pupils with mild intellectual disabilities or are integrated into mainstream education in segregated classes or schools.

Inclusive schooling is a challenging concept that cannot be addressed comprehensively and immediately. It requires knowledge of the specifics of educating children and students with health and/or social disadvantages, as well as the creation of legislative and other conditions for its implementation into the current education system in Slovakia.

Specifics of educating children and students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (from marginalised Roma communities)

The process of promoting the current educational concept for children, and students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (SDB), especially from marginalised Roma communities (MRC) in Slovakia has long been based on

⁴ Retrieved from <https://www.slov-lex.sk/ezbierky/pravne-predpisy/SK/ZZ/2008/245/>

⁵ Retrieved from <https://www.noviny.sk/slovensko/782843-slovensko-celi-zalobe-kvoli-diskriminacii-romskych-deti-v-skolach>

⁶ Retrieved from <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/SK/legal-content/summary/equal-treatment-irrespective-of-racial-or-ethnic-origin.html>

finding an answer to the question: *How can we support the education of these children, and students, whose specific psychological and cultural deprivation has not only disrupted their personal, cognitive and linguistic development, but has also affected their classification as children, and students with special educational needs?*

The concept of a socially disadvantaged environment refers to a specific social environment that negatively impacts a child and may also be the cause of their disadvantage. According to the guidelines of the Ministry of Education, Research, Development and Youth of the Slovak Republic,⁷ when assessing the school abilities of children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, a socially disadvantaged environment is considered to be characterised by at least three of the following criteria: the child's family does not fulfil basic functions (socialisation, education, emotional and economic), poverty and material deprivation of the family, insufficient education of legal guardians – at least one parent has not completed basic education, inadequate housing and hygiene conditions, difference between the language used at home and the language of the school, family life in segregated communities, social exclusion of the community or family of the child.

The most marginalised ethnic group in Slovakia is the Roma, a tribal ethnic group originating from northern India (Punjab). They differ from the rest of the population not only anthropologically, but also in terms of specific sociocultural characteristics, which allows us to speak of transcultural differences (Mann, 1992). The Roma ethnic group has lived in Slovakia for several centuries. They differ from other national minorities and the majority in terms of their origin, language, way of life, historical and social context, social class structure, and anthropological characteristics (Portik, Miňová, 2011). The Roma ethnic group suffers from poverty and material deprivation, low levels of education and living standards, as well as high rates of unemployment and crime, which is why children from marginalised Roma communities are the most vulnerable group in Slovakia. As a result of social exclusion in socio-economic, cultural, and political dimensions, we are talking about children, students, and youth from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (Kaleja, 2013).

Before starting school, children from SDB/MRC only have a limited command of their mother tongue – Romani (a Romani dialect) – which they use at home, and often do not have the opportunity to learn the Slovak language. In this respect, they are disadvantaged; only some of them enter first grade as bilingual students, speaking Romani and, to some extent, Slovak, but they are not fluent in either language. In this context, Šotolová (2002) writes about Roma who communicate

⁷ Retrieved from <https://www.statpedu.sk>

only in the language used in the lower class, which provides them with a limited language code and does little to stimulate the development of intellectual abilities. Therefore, she considers the language barrier and lack of knowledge of the state language to be one of the leading causes of these pupils' failure at school.

In this context, compulsory preschool education for children from SDB/MRC in kindergarten is important, as it would prepare them for school by developing their knowledge and skills in various areas. This would include creating a favourable climate for the education of all children, including those from majority and minority groups, e.g., by overcoming language barriers (knowledge of the Romani language) and accelerating adaptation to the school environment. In this regard, it could also be effective to ensure the participation of a teaching assistant in the educational process, as well as the use of specific educational methods and forms of work, special teaching aids, or cooperation with other professionals, e.g., psychologists, special educators, social workers (Vítková, 2007).

Children from SDB/MRC show clear signs of psychological and cultural deprivation. Psychological deprivation is a psychological state that arises in situations where a child's basic psychological needs are not sufficiently met for an extended period of time. Most often, these children manifest emotional and intellectual immaturity, developmental unevenness, and behavioural disorders (Průcha, Walterová, Mareš, 2003). As a result of psychological and cultural deprivation and functional impairment of the central nervous system in children from SDB/MRC, intellectual disability is often diagnosed as *"a collective term for a congenital defect in intellectual abilities, such as the inability to achieve an appropriate level of intellectual development."* The main signs of intellectual disability include low intelligence manifested by insufficient development of thinking, perception, abstraction, attention, limited learning ability, and more difficult adaptation to normal living conditions, etc.

The family plays the most important role in shaping the relationship of children and pupils from SDB/MRC with education. According to Lukáč (2015), upbringing in Roma families is collectivist. The basis of upbringing is an emphasis on the child's freedom. No enormous effort is expected from the child in terms of school preparation. The family protects the child, but at the same time restricts it. The family passes on the Roma culture, its values, norms, and patterns of behaviour to the child, but these are at odds with the cultural patterns of the majority society. Gender stereotypes prevail in Roma family upbringing in relation to girls and boys. The family shapes each of its members' personalities to the greatest extent possible. Family upbringing influences the educational process and pupils' motivation to learn at school. Teachers in the school environment try to influence children's upbringing and motivate them to learn, but the values and

norms of Roma children are so strongly shaped by family environments that their efforts are often unsuccessful.

The cognitive, emotional, and psychosocial development of children from socially disadvantaged families/MRC, often with intellectual disabilities) in preschool and early school age is influenced by inappropriate family upbringing, low educational and cultural levels, unfavourable socio-economic conditions, low value placed on education in the family, lack of aspiration for further education and personal development, and lack of choice of future occupation and employment in the labor market (Hlebová, 2018).

Strategic documents of the Government of the Slovak Republic on inclusive education for children and students with special educational needs

Inclusion as one of the fundamental principles of education and training was also established in the amendment to the Education Act No. 245/2008 Coll. (from January 1, 2022)⁸ and is reflected in other strategic documents of the Government of the Slovak Republic with a forecast of achieving these goals by 2030. Their significance lies in focusing on inclusive approaches to the education and training of children and students, including those from SDB/MRC, at all levels of school education. These include (Hlebová, 2024):

*The National program for the development of education and training for 2018 – 2027*⁹ – approved by the Slovak government on June 27, 2018. The program aims to provide a long-term concept for the content of education and training covering the long-term goals and objectives of the Slovak Republic in the field of education and training from pre-primary through primary and secondary to higher education, as well as further education with the aim of personal development and the acquisition of relevant knowledge and skills necessary for the successful employment of graduates in the labour market, harmonising personal goals with the benefit of society as a whole (p. 5). The program notes that the Slovak education system continues to exhibit insufficient levels of inclusion, particularly in pre-primary education, despite rising participation rates. Compared to the European Union average (95,4 %), Slovakia still has a low participation rate in pre-primary education for children (83,2 %). Consequently, the Council Resolution on the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training to achieve a European Education Area (2021 – 2030) sets out five general strategic priorities: improving quality, equity, inclusion and success in education and training for all; lifelong learning and mobility as a reality for all; increasing the competences and motivation of teaching staff; strengthening

⁸ Retrieved from <https://www.minedu.sk/zmeny-v-novele-zakona-2452008-zz-od-112022/>

⁹ Retrieved from <https://www.minedu.sk/narodny-program-rozvoja-vychovy-a-vzdelavania/>

European higher education; supporting the green and digital transformation in education and training through education and training (p. 8).

*The Strategy for equality, inclusion and participation of Roma until 2030*¹⁰ – developed by the Office of the Plenipotentiary of the Government of the Slovak Republic for Roma Communities based on Government Resolution No. 324 of July 3, 2019. The National Strategy is a set of principles and goals aimed at ending the segregation of Roma communities, promoting significant positive change in social inclusion and non-discrimination, changing attitudes, and improving coexistence. The Slovak education system has long faced problems with the inclusion of children from MRC: *"Compared to other children, socially disadvantaged children have almost half the participation rate in pre-primary education, while they are more than four times more likely to be enrolled in special education and eight times more likely to repeat a grade"* (p. 10). The implementation of inclusive education programs in kindergartens and primary schools is carried out through national projects, *School Open to All* and *Support for pre-primary Education of Children I*. The objectives of the Strategy for Equality, Inclusion and Participation of Roma until 2030 focus on three basic areas of the education system: the objective of supporting children/pupils and caring for families; the objective of supporting the professional capacities of teachers; and objectives aimed at supporting the creation of a stimulating environment for children and pupils from marginalised Roma communities.

*The Strategy for an inclusive approach to education and training until 2030*¹¹ – was approved by the Slovak government under No. 732 on December 8, 2021, and focused on changing the education system from segregation to inclusion, with the aim of *"an inclusive education system that provides education to all children, pupils, and students, respecting the individual characteristics and diverse educational needs of each child, pupil, or student and enabling them to fulfil their potential to the highest possible degree. At the same time, the inclusive approach aims to support and develop every person involved in the development of the child, pupil, or student"* (p. 4). The Strategy focuses on six priority areas with defined objectives for achieving an inclusive approach to education and training in the Slovak Republic: inclusive education and support measures, the counselling system in education, desegregation in education and training, removal of barriers in the school environment, training and education of teaching and professional staff, and destigmatisation. The document outlines the basic philosophy of an inclusive approach to education and training, aiming to create a pro-inclusive

¹⁰ Retrieved from https://www.romovia.vlada.gov.sk/site/assets/files/1113/strategia_2030.pdf

¹¹ Retrieved from <https://www.minedu.sk/30864-sk/strategia-inkluzivneho-pristupu-vo-vychove-a-vzdelavani/>

education system that provides education to all children, pupils, and students without distinction, respects the uniqueness and diversity of each individual, and enables them to fulfil their potential to the highest possible degree. The long-term goal is to create an environment conducive to inclusive education, motivating schools to become inclusive and, at the same time, motivating parents to perceive inclusive schools as the primary option for the education of all children, pupils, and students with special educational needs (health and/or social disadvantages, and giftedness).

*The First action plan for implementing the Strategy for an inclusive approach in education and training for 2022 – 2024*¹² - was drawn up in accordance with the Slovak Government Resolution No. 732 of December 8, 2021. The primary purpose of the document is to elaborate and specify the strategic objectives approved in the Strategy for Inclusive Approach in Education and Training until 2030, thereby responding to the requirement to implement inclusion in Slovak education. The first action plan covers six areas. Each area is divided into strategic objectives, and each strategic objective contains one or more implementation methods. Each implementation method is linked to several feasible measures, including financial coverage, management and co-management, and, finally, output, a measurable indicator of the achievement of strategic objectives.

*The Second action plan for implementing the Strategy for inclusive approach in education and training for 2025 – 2027*¹³ – follows up on the first action plan for implementing the Strategy for Inclusive Approach in Education and Training for 2022–2024 and outlines the areas, objectives, measures, and activities in line with other related national strategic framework documents that determine the direction of policies and national activities in the field of inclusive education. The second action plan (2024) consists of six areas: inclusive education and support measures; the counselling system in education; desegregation in education and training; removal of barriers in the school environment; training and education of teaching staff and professional staff; and destigmatisation. Each area is divided into objectives that will be fulfilled through specific measures and activities, including determining their financial coverage, management, and co-management, as well as the outputs, which represent measurable indicators of objective achievement.

*Introduction of support measures in education and training*¹⁴ – The most significant change in the modern history of inclusive education in Slovakia began

¹² Retrieved from <https://eduworld.sk/cd/tasr/9855/prvy-akcny-plan-k-strategii-inkluzivneho-pristupu-ma-riesit-13-cielov>

¹³ Retrieved from <https://www.minedu.sk/data/att/043/32120.28c774.pdf>

¹⁴ Retrieved from <https://nivam.sk/podporne-opatrenia-pre-deti-a-ziakov/>

on May 30, 2023, with the introduction of 21 support measures into the education system. The introduction of support measures into the education system is part of the implementation of the Slovak Republic's Recovery and Resilience Plan – *Component 6: Accessibility, Development, and Quality of Inclusive Education*. The new support system has been in effect since September 1, 2023, and provides educational and training support to every child and student with a disability. This targeted support will improve the quality of inclusive education. Individual support measures address the diverse educational needs of children and pupils and may be temporary or permanent. On the other hand, they may reflect the child's health, living conditions, or other factors. Support measures in the Education Act are defined in the amendment to the Education Act under § 145a: *"A support measure under the Education Act is a measure provided by a school or educational institution that is necessary for a child or pupil to participate fully in education and training and to develop their knowledge, skills, and abilities (Section 145a, paragraph 1 of the Education Act)."* A catalogue of support measures and accompanying materials for individual support measures in inclusive education is available online.¹⁵

*The Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Slovak Republic*¹⁶ – prepared by the Government of the Slovak Republic in 2021, amended and approved by the European Commission on July 14 2023, based on the criteria of Regulation (EU) 2021/241 of the European Parliament and of the Council (EU) 2021/241 of February 12 2021 establishing a mechanism to support recovery and resilience. In the area of Quality Education, reforms and investments relate to two components: *Component 6: Accessibility, development, and quality of inclusive education* – the main objective of this component is to reduce the proportion of pupils who do not achieve even basic skills, to reduce the socio-economic impact on pupils' educational outcomes, and to promote equal opportunities in education. Other objectives include increasing the proportion of preschool-age children participating in pre-primary education, reducing early school-leaving rates, with a special focus on children with health and social disadvantages, adapting education to the individual needs of each child, and reducing the rate of transfer of disadvantaged children from mainstream education to special education. The reforms and investments in this component are in line with the proposals of the National Program for the Development of Education and Training for 2018–2027

¹⁵ Retrieved from <https://podporneopatrenia.minedu.sk/data/att/75d/28077.59adc1.pdf>; <https://podporneopatrenia.minedu.sk/sprievodne-metodicke-materialy-k-podpornym-opatreniam/>

¹⁶ Retrieved from <https://www.minedu.sk/plan-obnovy-a-odolnosti-sr/>; <https://www.minedu.sk/komponent-6-dostupnost-rozvoj-a-kvalita-inkluzivneho-vzdelavania-na-vsetkych-stupnoch/>; <https://www.minedu.sk/komponent-7-vzdelavanie-pre-21-storocie/>

(2018), as well as other national strategic documents focused on the social inclusion of disadvantaged groups and the fight against poverty and social exclusion. The reforms and investments are also in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the EU Charter¹⁷ of Fundamental Rights.¹⁸ *Component 7: Education for the 21st century* – the overall objective of this component is to improve pupils' literacy and the skills needed to live in a global, low-carbon digital economy and society (critical thinking, digital, and soft skills). The primary school curriculum reform will create new educational content organised into multi-year cycles. Instead of imparting ready-made information, teaching will create situations in which pupils can interpret information in the context of real-life experience. The new curriculum will require new textbooks and changes in teacher training so that teachers can apply these changes in their daily practice. At the same time, the reform will strengthen the quality of teaching and the professional skills of staff, and motivate them to pursue lifelong professional development. Emphasis will also be placed on inclusive education and the acquisition of digital skills.

National projects on inclusive approaches to the education of children, pupils, and students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (from marginalised Roma communities)

In promoting the philosophy of inclusive education for children and students with special educational needs in Slovakia, national projects from 2009 to the present have also been extremely important. In these projects, we define the solution's target focus and results based on available information, primarily from the project websites. The national projects focused on inclusive education for children and students from SDB/MRC. They were implemented under the auspices of the Slovak Government, the Office of the Plenipotentiary of the Slovak Government for Roma Communities, the Ministry of Education, Research, Development and Youth of the Slovak Republic and the National Institute for Youth Education in Bratislava, and were supported by European Structural Funds. These include (Hlebová, 2024):

The National project for Professional and career growth of teaching staff (2009 – 2015)¹⁹ – The aim was to create an effective system of further education for teaching and professional staff in schools and educational institutions with an

¹⁷ Retrieved from <https://www.employment.gov.sk/sk/rodina-socialna-pomoc/tazke-zdravotne-postihnutie/kontaktne-miesto-prava-osob-so-zdravotnym-postihnutim/dohovor-osn-pravach-osob-so-zdravotnym-postihnutim-slovenska-republika.html>

¹⁸ Retrieved from <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/SK/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:12016P/TXT>

¹⁹ Retrieved from <https://archiv.mpc-edu.sk/sk/projekty/plkr>

emphasis on the development of key competences. Project outcomes: 121,496 graduates from among teaching and professional staff.

*The National project Training teaching staff for the inclusion of marginalised Roma communities I (2012 – 2015)*²⁰ – The aim was to ensure continuous training for teaching and specialist staff involved in the education of pupils from MRC, to support a full-day education system in primary schools, and to modernise the teaching process in primary schools. Involved in the project: 4 000 teaching staff (including 500 teaching assistants), 1 500 pupils from SDB/MRC (aged 6–18), 5 000 parents of children from MRC, 200 professional staff, 5 000 state and local government employees; project outputs: creation of 12 continuing education programs; completion of training by 4 200 teaching and professional staff at primary schools; creation of 40 teaching resources for teaching and professional staff; creation of 400 jobs for teaching assistants; introduction of a full-day education system model.

*The National project Inclusive model of education at the pre-primary level of the school system II (2013 – 2015)*²¹ – The aim was to improve the educational level of children from MRC, through the education of teaching and professional staff, thereby creating the necessary competencies for their entry into primary education; involved in the project: 110 kindergartens and 5 606 children from MRC. Project outcomes: 466 teaching staff and 31 professional staff graduated from the innovative continuing education program; creation and implementation of three educational programs for pupils from MRC, and their parents; creation of a network of schools (so-called twins) with exchange of experiences; foreign internships for 120 teaching staff; creation of 1 000 teaching resources for pupils from MRC; equipping 200 primary schools with interactive systems – 400 units, and didactic packages – 200 units.

*The National project Activating methods in education (2013 – 2015)*²² – The aim was to deepen and improve the key competencies of teaching and professional staff for the effective implementation of activating education methods, i.e. in the educational part of the educational process; to expand and improve the educational competencies and skills of teaching and professional staff in kindergartens and school clubs for children, leisure centres, elementary art schools, conservatories, and school boarding schools, with an emphasis on media literacy. Project outputs: creation of 132 educational video programs included in

²⁰ Retrieved from <https://archiv.mpc-edu.sk/sites/default/files/rocepo-dokumenty/vseobecne-informacie/mrk201101.pdf>

²¹ Retrieved from <https://archiv.mpc-edu.sk/sites/default/files/rocepo-dokumenty/vseobecne-informacie/mrk201101.pdf>

²² Retrieved from <https://archiv.mpc-edu.sk/sk/projekty/amv>

33 interactive homes and 6,480 graduates from among teaching staff as part of an innovative continuing education program; redistribution of 1,550 interactive whiteboards with accessories (educational packages) to selected schools and educational institutions.

The National project For Inclusive Education (2015 – 2016, duration 20 months)²³ – followed up on previous national projects. The aim was to keep children in school as long as possible in an engaging and informative way and enable them to prepare for the following day in the afternoon, which is necessary to improve their performance, as well as to engage in activities that are interesting to them and which they can also engage in from a long-term perspective. The inclusive education model was intended to help improve the preparedness of children from MRC and support their social inclusion. A significant benefit of the project was the creation of inclusive teams consisting of teaching staff and specialists – psychologists, special educators, therapeutic educators, and social educators – who would work with children not only in schools but also in the field. Those involved in the project: 100 primary schools and 50 kindergartens to support inclusive education in preparing children for compulsory schooling and introducing a full-day education system. Project outcomes: 360 specialists and 250 teaching assistants worked with children and pupils, forming inclusive teams; individual approach and provision of specific assistance to pupils; improvement in attendance, performance and behaviour of pupils, mutual communication, assistance to teachers in managing the classroom atmosphere and accumulated duties; Introduction of a full-day education system as one of the tools for inclusion (students spent the afternoon preparing for lessons, then participated in clubs whose focus they determined themselves). In the kindergarten environment, teams of experts worked with preschool-age children so that they would not be unnecessarily transferred to special elementary schools; experts identified the causes of possible lagging, developed programs for them, and proposed solutions; Several publications (e.g., Pedagogical model of inclusive education) were created, offering innovative methodological approaches to the education and training of children and students from MRC. Experts also developed methodological tools for working in inclusive teams, a screening manual, and a manual for implementing stimulation programs.

The National project School open to all (2016 – 2019)²⁴ – The aim was to ensure equal access to quality education for all and to improve the school results of children and pupils from MRC; involved in the project: 50 kindergartens and

²³ Retrieved from <http://prined.mpc-edu.sk/index.php/o-projekte>

²⁴ Retrieved from <https://www.minedu.sk/narodny-projekt-skola-otvorena-vsetkym-po-troch-rokoch-konci/>

130 primary schools, 942 children participated in informal education in kindergartens, 43 714 pupils participated in the all-day education system in primary schools. Project outcomes: creation of jobs for 422 teaching assistants and 234 specialist staff – psychologists, special and social educators; 1 928 teachers and specialist staff completed the refresher training program; participating schools received teaching packages worth EUR 250,000.

*The National project Support for pre-primary education of children from marginalised Roma communities I (2017 – 2020)*²⁵ – The aim was to create an inclusive environment in kindergartens, and, through cooperation with families, to increase the number of children from MRC attending kindergarten, thereby ensuring an increase in the educational level of members of these communities as one of the tools for socio-economic integration. Project outcomes: brings teaching assistants and specialist staff to kindergartens, who, together with other kindergarten staff, form inclusive teams and implement systematic measures for increased inclusivity (e.g., stimulation programs for the development of cognitive abilities, etc.); the project also included working with families whose children did not yet attend kindergarten, with the aim of improving the target groups' relationship to the value of education and establishing functional cooperation with kindergartens; Cooperation with other projects in the "Take Away" package focused on field social work, community centers, land settlement, and health promotion.

*The National project Helping professions in the education of children and students I (2019 – 2020) and The National project Helping professions in the education of children and students II (2020 –2021)*²⁶ – Their aim was to create conditions for securing new jobs for teaching assistants, teaching assistants for children and pupils with health disabilities, members of inclusive teams (social education teachers, school special education teachers, school psychologists) and building support teams in kindergartens, primary and secondary schools, but also the sustainability of projects that project I and project II follow up on (sustainability of jobs). Involved in the project: 1 012 schools – 266 kindergartens, 668 primary schools, 78 secondary schools; project outputs: newly created jobs (1 346) provided educational support to children and pupils regardless of their individual prerequisites for the implementation of inclusive education directly in the school environment.

*The national project Support for pre-primary education of children from marginalised Roma communities II (2020 – 2023)*²⁷ – The aim was to increase the

²⁵ Retrieved from <https://www.minv.sk/?NP-PRIM-predprimarne-vzdelavanie-MRK>

²⁶ Retrieved from <https://www.minedu.sk/data/att/671/18285.31cd33.pdf>

²⁷ Retrieved from <https://www.minv.sk/?NP-PRIM-predprimarne-vzdelavanie-MRK-II>

number of children from MRC attending pre-primary education by creating an inclusive environment in kindergartens and through support measures aimed at improving cooperation with families, thereby ensuring an increase in the educational level of MRC members. Project outcomes: positive changes in inclusive education directly in the school environment through educational support from teaching assistants, teaching assistants for children and pupils with disabilities, and members of inclusive teams (school psychologist, special educator, social educator) in schools; Cooperation with families was strengthened by creating a new non-teaching position in kindergartens – parent assistant; the purpose of employing parent assistants was to help children and their families with the adaptation and socialisation process in and outside of kindergarten. Preferential employment of Roma women and men in non-teaching, teaching, and professional professions continued. Cooperation with other projects in the "Take Away" package focused on field social work, community centres, land settlement, and health promotion.

*The national project Opportunity for all (2024 – 2027)*²⁸ – The aim is to pilot test applied solutions to the problem of segregation in education, with the project focusing on the racial segregation of children from SDB/MRC. The introduction of verified solutions can mitigate the significant impact of the socio-economic environment on pupils' educational outcomes and enhance access to education for all children and pupils, with a primary focus on those from the MRC. The project is announced by the Ministry of Education, Research, Development, and Youth of the Slovak Republic and is currently in the implementation phase.

*The National project Creation and verification of an early warning system for early school leaving and targeted support for pupils in the counselling and prevention system (2024–2028)*²⁹ – The aim is to create an early warning system that identifies pupils at risk of dropping out of school and provides them with the necessary support (also from SDB/MRC). The project focuses on three main objectives: 1. creation and verification of an early warning system for early school leaving – the system will serve to identify pupils at risk of leaving school at an early stage and provide them with the necessary professional support; 2. preparing practical methodologies and training for school staff so that they know what procedures and assistance options are available for pupils at risk of early school leaving; 3. cooperation with the Ministry of Education to improve support for pupils at risk – the project will lay the foundations for systematic support

²⁸ Retrieved from <https://www.minedu.sk/39814-sk/narodne-projekty/>

²⁹ Retrieved from <https://vudpap.sk/vyskumny-ustav-detskej-psychologie-a-patopsychologie-spusta-narodny-projekt-na-predchadzanie-predcasnemu-ukonceniu-skolskej-dochadzky-np-pusd/>

measures and propose further professional procedures that can be implemented in follow-up projects. The project is being run by the Ministry of Education, Research, Development, and Youth of the Slovak Republic in collaboration with the Research Institute of Child Psychology and Pathopsychology, and is currently underway.

*The national Project Support for educational opportunities (2025 – 2027)*³⁰ – The aim of the current project is to respond to the issue of the above-average representation of pupils from marginalised communities and socially disadvantaged backgrounds in special education in Slovakia and to transfer pupils who are not mentally disabled into mainstream education through a system of adaptation classes and the provision of adequate support. The Ministry of Education, Science, Research, and Sport of the Slovak Republic organises the project. The project aims to ensure that every child in Slovakia has a fair chance at a quality education that matches their abilities and potential. The sustainability of the project will be ensured mainly through: a methodology for the functioning of adaptation classes, which will continue to support schools even after the project ends; a trained network of experts and educators who will continue their work within the counseling and prevention system; created materials, methodologies, and procedures that will remain publicly available for further use; links to other national projects, which will ensure continued support even after the end of funding from the European Structural Funds. The long-term ambition of the project is for the adaptation class system to become a normal part of Slovak education.

Conclusion

In this study, we present the theoretical foundations of an inclusive approach to the education and training of children and students with special educational needs, within the context of the internationally accepted philosophy of inclusion and its implementation in the Slovak Republic. We place particular emphasis on the specifics of the education of children and students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (from marginalised Roma communities), which are the focus of the presented strategic legislative documents and national projects of the Slovak government, aimed at overcoming barriers and increasing their academic success in inclusive conditions. The subject of our further research will be to identify aspects of school success among children and students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (marginalised Roma communities) in Slovakia, as

³⁰ Retrieved from https://eurofondy.gov.sk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Zamer-NP-Podpora_vzdelavacich_prilezitosti_final.pdf;
<https://www.minedu.sk/43143-sk/blizsie-informacie-o-projekte/>

well as challenges for inclusive educational theory and practice. Based on the overview presented, we will seek answers to the following research questions:

1. How successful and sustainable is the inclusive approach to the education and training of children and students with special educational needs (especially from marginalised Roma communities) in kindergartens, primary schools, secondary schools, and universities in Slovakia, based on the acceptance of strategic documents and the fulfilment of national project objectives?
2. What are the uncertainties and barriers in the process of promoting an inclusive approach to the education and training of children and students with special educational needs (especially from marginalised Roma communities) in kindergartens, primary schools, secondary schools, and universities in Slovakia?
3. What educational models are effective in improving the school success of children and students with special educational needs (especially from marginalised Roma communities) in kindergartens, primary schools, secondary schools, and universities in Slovakia?

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IMPLEMENTATION OF MENTORING AS A SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS OF SECONDARY VOCATIONAL EDUCATION IN THE PREŠOV SELF-GOVERNING REGION IN SLOVAKIA¹

Implementácia mentoringu ako podpory pre žiakov stredných odborných škôl v Prešovskom samosprávnom kraji

Tatiana Dubayová,² Hedviga Hafičová³

Abstract: Mentoring, as a highly effective method of support based on personal relationships, has a stable place in schools abroad. In the educational process, it can be implemented at the teacher-student level or even among students themselves, within the so-called peer mentoring. The results of presented research come from a screening conducted in June 2024 at the beginning of the implementation of mentoring in schools, and in 2026, repeated data collection will be organized to record the changes that mentoring in schools has brought about. A total of 1,227 first- to third-year students from ten selected secondary vocational schools in the Prešov Region participated in the research. Based on the average values for each type of motivation, we can conclude that internal motivation to study appears to be more important for students than external motivation. Approximately one-third of students perceived their first year at school as difficult and would welcome help with orienting themselves in the school environment or integrating into the group. The results show that students prefer support from a mentor-teacher, and from a mentor, whether a teacher or a student, students would mainly expect help in the form of advice from a more experienced person, pointing out mistakes, and support and encouragement in making decisions. The results are a basis for setting up a support process through individualized work, which aims to improve not only their academic performance but also the subjective well-being and quality of life of secondary vocational school students.

Keywords: mentoring, vocational school, social support.

Abstrakt: Mentoring, ako vysoko efektívna metóda podpory založená na osobnom vzťahu, má na školách v zahraničí svoje stabilné miesto. V edukačnom procese sa môže realizovať na úrovni pedagóg – žiak alebo aj medzi žiakmi navzájom, v rámci tzv. peer-mentoringu. Výsledky prezentovaného výskumu pochádzajú zo screeningu, ktorý bol realizovaný v júni 2024 na začiatku implementácie mentoringu na školy. Do výskumu sa zapojilo 1227 žiakov prvého až tretieho ročníka z desiatich vybraných stredných odborných škôl v Prešovskom samosprávnom kraji. Na základe priemerných hodnôt v jednotlivých druhoch motivácií môžeme tvrdiť, že vnútorná motivácia pre štúdium u žiakov a javí sa ako dôležitejšia, než vonkajšia motivácia. Približne tretina žiakov vnímala prvý ročník na škole ako ťažký a uvítali by pomoc s orientáciou v prostredí školy alebo so začlenením sa do kolektívu. Výsledky ukazujú, že žiaci preferujú podporu od mentora-učiteľa a od mentora, či už učiteľa alebo žiaka, by žiaci očakávali hlavne pomoc v podobe rady od skúsenejšieho človeka, upozornenie na chyby a podporu a dodanie odvahy pri robení rozhodnutí. Získané výsledky sú východiskom pre nastavenie procesu podpory prostredníctvom

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individualizovanej práce, ktorého ambíciou je zvýšiť nielen školskú úspešnosť, ale aj subjektívnu pohodu a kvalitu života žiakov stredných odborných škôl.

Kľúčové slová: *mentoring, stredná odborná škola, sociálna opora, Prešovský samosprávny kraj.*

Introduction

Have you ever wondered who influences a student's success and what form the support they provide takes? Social support is an important source of help and security in various life situations. Among those who offer it to us during our lives may be a mentor. This is a person who, through (ideally regular) meetings, provides the mentee with emotional and psychological support to make them feel accepted and included. The relationship between the mentee and the mentor then helps the mentee overcome obstacles, not in a directive or authoritative manner, but with respect for the mentee's autonomy in decision-making (Hobson, 2012). Several studies have confirmed that mentoring is a powerful intervention method based on personal connection, through which a safe space is created for the mentee to reveal their potential, talents, or inner motivations for action, and not just through the giving of advice. In this safe space, the mentee thinks about possibilities, learns to evaluate them, is encouraged to implement them (Leake, Burgstahler, Izzo, 2011; Hobson, 2012), and has a significant impact on improving their academic performance. It is a relationship focused on the future (Fischler, Zachary, 2009). The creation of a close relationship between mentor and mentee, characterized by reciprocity, trust, and empathy, is considered key to beneficial socio-emotional, cognitive, and personal development (Rhodes, 2005). Mentoring can take place in various forms and levels of social relationships. In the educational process, we can observe it specifically at the teacher-student level or even among students themselves as peer mentoring. The importance and effectiveness of mentoring students, which can also be perceived as a form of social support for students, is also pointed out by many contemporary authors who see it as suitable for application at the peer level, i.e., student-to-student, especially in the school environment, e.g., Hobson (2012), Mullen (2012), Willis et al. (2012), Powell (2016), and others. Several authors have confirmed that social support from teachers and classmates influences student development at various levels. For example, students who perceive sufficient social support from teachers have higher cognitive autonomy (Bačíková, Berinšterová, 2017), lower problem behavior, better self-confidence, and adaptive skills (Demaray, Malecki, 2002), and positively correlate with a higher quality of life related to health (Demir, Leyendecker, 2018) as well as overall school success and school engagement (Ghaith, 2002, Demir, Leyendecker, 2018). Teachers, their methods, and teaching styles are important factors in motivating students to learn (Thoonen et al., 2011).

Motivation is what drives human behavior and, to a certain extent, determines the results of one's actions, in our case, a student's academic success (Ferjenčík, Tatranová, 2001). Motivation is also considered by several other authors to be a force that activates energy and drives an individual's behavior (Spinath et al., 2014). Locke and Latham (2004) state that it relates to internal factors that stimulate action and is also associated with external factors that can act as incentives for action. As stated by the authors mentioned above, important parameters of motivation are: direction (choice), intensity (effort), and duration (perseverance). Being intrinsically motivated means that a person decides to do things because they are interesting in themselves or because they help satisfy three basic psychological needs: competence, relatedness (a sense of connection with others), and autonomy (a sense that one is capable of initiating and controlling one's own actions) (Deci, Ryan, 2000). Motivácia, ako sebaregulované správanie je vysvetľované sebadeterminačnou teóriou, podľa ktorej čím sú ľudia vnútorne motivovanejší, tým efektívnejšie sa učia, sú kreatívnejší, podávajú lepšie výkony v škole i v práci a predovšetkým, sú spokojnejší s tým, čo robia a majú menšiu chuť s tým prestať (Deci, Ryan, 2012; Ryan, Deci, 2000). U žiakov stredných odborných škôl, ktorí sa nachádzajú vo fáze tvorenia so vzťahu k svojmu študijnému odboru, je motivácia Motivation as self-regulated behavior is explained by self-determination theory, according to which the more intrinsically motivated people are, the more effectively they learn, the more creative they are, the better they perform at school and at work, and above all, the more satisfied they are with what they do and the less inclined they are to give it up (Deci, Ryan, 2012; Ryan, Deci, 2000). For secondary vocational school students who are in the process of forming a relationship with their field of study, motivation is a factor that can influence whether they ultimately complete their studies successfully, transfer to another field, or leave the education system without taking their final exams. It is more difficult for students who experience some kind of impairment, for example due to developmental learning disorders, who, according to Žovinec et al. (2025), prefer to study at a secondary vocational school.

As of September 2024, there were 412 secondary vocational schools in Slovakia (62 in the Prešov Self-Governing Region), attended by 137,577 students (in all grades) in 26 fields of study, of which 44,715 were first-year students (CVTI, 2025). The aim of the national project *Improvement of secondary vocational education in the Prešov Self-Governing Region II* (implementation period 2023 – 2027) is to increase the quality of vocational education and training through closer links between schools and the real needs of the labor market. The project supports cooperation with employers in the creation and innovation of educational programs, the development of professional skills of teachers, and the building of an inclusive and modern environment in schools. One of the six specific

objectives of the national project is to promote inclusive education for pupils. The basic strategy for this objective is to introduce mentoring for pupils into the school environment. Several university lecturers from various departments of the Faculty of Education at the University of Prešov in Prešov were actively involved in both projects – the completed and ongoing ones. Their task was to help implement student mentoring, which we see as one of the most effective methods of support.

The paper focuses on examining the level of motivation of secondary vocational school students to learn and identifying the difficulties they encountered in their first year. We were also interested in their attitude towards possible support from teachers or peers. This objective was subsequently transformed into the following research questions:

- What kind of motivation for studying is most common among students at secondary vocational schools?
- Did students need help in their first year of study, and in what areas?
- Who do students prefer as a mentor – a teacher or another student?

Research methods and methodology

Research sample

The screening was carried out in May and June, that means in the last months of the 2023/2024 school year. The screening involved 1,449 first-year students of two-year study programs, first- and second-year students in three-year study programs, and first- to third-year students in four-year study programs from ten schools, representing 47.1% of the total sample of 3,078 students in these schools in these grades. Students in their final year were not included in the survey. Based on a control question included in the questionnaire, 222 invalid responses were identified after analysis and excluded from the final analysis. Despite their removal, we can consider the research sample at each school to be representative and the results to reflect the situation at that school. Of the total number of 10 schools, 8 schools have a technical focus, and two schools train specialists in gastronomy. At two schools (with a technical focus), the participants were only boys, while at three schools, girls predominated among the participants. There were therefore differences between schools, but these should also be attributed to specific factors such as the subjects taught or the proximity of the school to marginalised communities, and it is not appropriate to interpret them in relation to the quality of education, pupil-teacher relationships or other factors that were not part of the research objectives.

A total of 287 girls (23.4 %) and 940 boys (76.6 %) from ten secondary vocational schools participated in the screening. Between 36.2 % and 58.5 % of the students from each school participated. The minimum age of respondents at

the time of data collection was 15 years (87 respondents), and the maximum was 20 years and older (11 respondents). The average age of students included in the analyses was 16.87 (SD = 1.0) (Table 1).

Table 1 Research sample – students from 10 secondary vocational schools in the Prešov Self-Governing Region

School	Gender	Number of pupils participating in the research	%	Total number of pupils in selected grades at the school
vocational school 1	female	6	5,6	251
	male	102	94,4	
vocational school 2	female	13	9,2	296
	male	129	90,8	
vocational school 3	female	94	81,7	284
	male	21	18,3	
vocational school 4	female	71	58,7	343
	male	50	41,3	
vocational school 5	female	5	2,6	395
	male	190	97,4	
vocational school 6	female	62	59,0	310
	male	43	41,0	
vocational school 7	female	-	0	272
	male	97	100	
vocational school 8	female	-	0	407
	male	150	100	
vocational school 9	female	-	0	241
	male	102	100	
vocational school 10	female	36	39,1	279
	male	56	60,9	
Total number of students	female	287	9,3	3078
	male	940	30,5	

(Source: own compilation)

Research tools

The Academic Motivation Scale was used in the research, specifically the version designed for adolescents, as well as a tool we developed to identify difficulties in the first year of secondary vocational school and students' attitudes toward possible mentor support.

Academic Motivation Scale – high school version (AMS-HS28)

The authors of the scale are Vallerand et al. (1992), whose intention was to create a measuring tool for assessing the internal and external motivation of students. The scale exists in several versions designed for different ages of students. By internal motivation, the authors of the scale mean impulses to activity arising from a feeling of inner satisfaction or from the satisfaction of cooperating in solving a problem. External motivation is perceived by the authors as a broad spectrum in which an individual derives satisfaction from the external environment by achieving an external reward. The scale distinguishes between three different types of internal motivation, three types of external motivation, and amotivation:

- external motivation – external regulation – the individual acts under the pressure of external regulation (e.g. I am studying so that I can get a better job later);
- external motivation – identification – the individual internalizes the external motive (e.g. I have decided to study today because it is important for me to get a good grade);
- external motivation – introjection – the individual has internalized the reasons for their behavior (e.g. I want to prove to myself that I can do it);
- intrinsic motivation – cognition – is associated with curiosity and the joy of discovery (e.g. I enjoy learning new things in a field that interests me);
- intrinsic motivation – stimulation experience – the individual experiences joy by engaging in a given activity (e.g. I enjoy discussing interesting ideas with others);
- intrinsic motivation – achieving success – the individual experiences joy from completing a task, from the process of creating and completing an activity (e.g. I enjoy it when I can surpass myself).

The student rates statements relating to individual types of motivation on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree).

In the second part of the questionnaire, after a brief explanation of the term mentor, students expressed their views on possible cooperation with a mentor-teacher and mentor-student. The students then answered the question of whether and in what ways the first year of study was challenging for them. The students

rated their answers on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree), evaluated statements with a yes/no answer, or selected an answer from the options provided.

The data obtained were analyzed using SPSS 20.0 software. ANOVA was used as the mathematical-statistical method.

Results

We present the research results according to the questions listed above. In the analyses presented, we did not consider the gender of the respondents, but we sorted some data according to school, grade, or other criteria, such as whether the first grade was perceived as difficult, according to individual types of motivation, etc.

What kind of motivation for studying prevails among secondary vocational school students?

The results obtained from 1,227 students in the study indicate that internal motivations for studying prevail over external ones (Table 2). No statistically significant difference was found but based on the average values for each type of motivation, we can say that motivation to learn and motivation to achieve success dominate in school studies and appear to be more important than external motivation. Based on the questionnaire items answered by the students, it appears that the students at the secondary vocational schools surveyed perceive their field of study as interesting and one in which they want to develop their skills and talents.

Of the types of external motivation, the results of this survey show a more pronounced tendency toward introjection, which is like internal motivation in terms of its characteristics. In this type, the individual internalizes external reasons, and if they are not fulfilled, unpleasant feelings of guilt and failure arise, which the individual wants to avoid.

Table 2 Level of internal and external motivation for studying

		Intrinsic motivation for learning		External motivation for learning	
	N	Mean	Maximum value	Mean	Maximum value
vocational school 1	108	32,2	60	29,0	60
vocational school 2	142	31,1		29,1	

vocational school 3	115	31,6		28,4	
vocational school 4	121	28,3		26,8	
vocational school 5	195	32,9		32,0	
vocational school 6	105	30,1		27,9	
vocational school 7	97	29,1		26,4	
vocational school 8	150	31,6		26,9	
vocational school 9	102	30,3		26,6	
vocational school 10	92	28,0		24,7	

(Source: own compilation)

In attempting to answer this research question, we found a relatively high level of demotivation among students (reluctance to learn), with an average score of 14.22 out of a maximum possible score of 20 (Table 3). Given the formulation of the items, it is possible that some students did not answer these questions truthfully and may have found them comical (e.g. *I don't know why I go to school at all*), but there is room for improvement in this area. The questionnaire did not include items that would allow for a qualitative analysis of low motivation to study in general, which is an incentive for school management to pay attention to signs of dissatisfaction or criticism from students. Table 3 shows that amotivation is approximately the same in all grades, although it appears to decline from first to third grade. This was also confirmed when comparing amotivation in individual grades at a specific school. In most of them, the reluctance to learn among third-year students was approximately one point lower than among first-year students. We would like to point out that the higher the average value, the higher the identification with the given motivation/subscale.

Table 3 Level of amotivation for studying

	N	Mean	Overall mean	Maximum value
vocational school 1	108	13,0	14,2	20
vocational school 2	142	14,2		
vocational school 3	115	15,0		
vocational school 4	121	15,3		
vocational school 5	195	13,1		
vocational school 6	105	14,4		

vocational school 7	97	15,0		
vocational school 8	150	14,2		
vocational school 9	102	14,1		
vocational school 10	92	14,9		

(Source: own compilation)

Did students find the first year difficult and need help at that time?

The results shown in Table 4 indicate that approximately one-third of students (28.3 %) found the first year at school difficult and would have welcomed help. For this item, students were asked to indicate what they needed help with in the first year, and based on a qualitative analysis of their responses, we can classify their needs into the following areas:

- Help with finding their way around the school, understanding the rules, learning teachers' names, and finding classrooms/workshops.
- Help with integrating into the group.
- Help with selected subjects that they found difficult, e.g., technical drawing, mathematics, chemistry, etc.
- Help with learning a different learning system and getting grips with new terminology in technical subjects, etc.
- Help in resolving individual relationships, e.g., help in managing conflicts with classmates or teachers.
- Help with personal problems, e.g., feeling overlooked, unimportant, feeling little interest from teachers, needing more encouragement and understanding from teachers. Several mentioned high levels of stress that they needed to learn to manage.

Table 4 Need for help in the first year of study

	N	%	Mean
vocational school 1	108	17,6	28,6 %
vocational school 2	142	33,8	
vocational school 3	115	36,5	
vocational school 4	121	47,9	
vocational school 5	195	19,5	
vocational school 6	105	29,5	

vocational school 7	97	21,6	
vocational school 8	150	20,0	
vocational school 9	102	35,3	
vocational school 10	92	30,4	

(Source: own compilation)

Who is the preferred form of mentoring support for students – the teacher or the student?

Of the total number of students, 46.9 % would like to work with a peer mentor, while approximately 6 % more would prefer to work with a teacher mentor. Students mainly expected help in the form of advice from a more experienced person, pointing out mistakes, and support and encouragement in making decisions. Emotional support in the form of listening or help with a difficult period in life is welcome, but support in the form of specific help or advice is more expected.

Table 5 Ranking of needs for assistance from mentor-teacher. Responses from all students involved in the screening (from most requested to least requested)

N = 1227
I need him to tell me where I'm going wrong.
I need advice from someone more experienced.
He needs to give me courage when I make decisions.
I need him to support me in achieving my goals.
I need help with studying.
I need him to listen to me.
I need him to help me get through a difficult period in my life.

(Source: own compilation)

Discussion

The screening results indicate that internal motivation to study prevails over external motivation, but at the same time, a high percentage of students report a reluctance to learn. For further research, it appears that the degree of demotivation at school may be an indicator of the success of measures in the form of introducing mentoring at school. In the case of implementing mentoring programs planned for the above-mentioned schools within the project, this variable will be one of the possible criteria for monitoring their effectiveness. Reducing demotivation to study is a challenge for teachers, and it appears that demotivation can also signal problems in other areas of a student's life. Previous research shows that it may be related to lower resilience in students – their ability to cope with difficult life situations (Dubayová, Hafičová, 2023). Correlations were also confirmed between amotivation and low feelings of autonomy and weak perceptions of self-competence (Held, Mejeh, 2024). The changes we observed in the reduction of amotivation among older students confirm the findings of Symonds et al. (2019), who attribute them to maturation and the transition to a personalized environment. Perceptions of school belongingness and the achievement of good academic results may also influence the reduction of amotivation to learn (Xie et al., 2022).

The results of the research show that almost one third of secondary vocational school students perceive the first year as difficult and would welcome help during this period in adapting to the new school environment, group, and learning system. At the same time, respondents reported high levels of stress related to adapting to school and little support and understanding from teachers. P After the introduction of measures to support adaptation during the implementation of the project, this criterion will also be monitored, which may reflect the school's support measures, and we expect that further surveys will show a decrease in the number of students who describe the first year as difficult. As several authors have pointed out, adaptation to school is related to adjusting to academic requirements and readiness to fulfill school obligations and challenges, and is directly related to motivation and school engagement (Feldt et al., 2011; Credé, Niehorster, 2012). The findings of Hoferichter et al. (2022) show that support from teachers at the individual level is associated with higher stress management skills among students and lower levels of perceived helplessness, while peer support is also associated with higher academic achievement.

From mentors, whether teachers or students, students would mainly expect help in the form of advice from a more experienced person, pointing out mistakes, and support and encouragement in making decisions. This implies that mentors should be sensitive and supportive, but at the same time, they are expected to have a certain level of expertise or experience in the field. Emotional support in the form of listening or helping with a difficult period in life is welcome, but

support in the form of specific help or advice is more expected. We do not expect any changes in these areas in the following measurements, but it will be interesting to see whether there will be any changes in the ranking caused by the fulfillment or non-fulfillment of students' needs. It should also be taken into account that at the time of the screening, students responded to hypothetical situations because they had not yet met with a mentor, but after the experience they will have after the implementation of mentoring, it is possible that this will influence their answers or preferences.

Based on our findings, we would like to make some practical recommendations for teacher-mentors, which could serve as a starting point for the preparation and implementation of support activities at secondary vocational schools:

- help them resolve individual relationships, e.g., how to communicate properly;
- help them navigate a situation or professional problem;
- when making decisions, allow students autonomy and do not interfere with the decision itself, but offer them options and information so that they can make an informed decision;
- help students establish quality professional contacts, help them find a suitable hobby that would develop their gifts or talents;
- encourage first-year students to get to know each other through various playful activities;
- help set rules for communication in the classroom so that students feel safe;
- communicate with other teachers or professional staff about students with disabilities and look for ways to set up support measures for them;
- take an interest in their personal stories and adapt your individual approach or communication with students to their specific situation.

It would be appropriate to process the variables examined using inductive statistical methods, which we consider a challenge for their processing in further scientific contributions, but at the same time it can also be perceived as a limitation of this study. Through open-ended questions that would focus on the students' own explanations of the difficulties they experienced in their first year of study, it would be possible to identify a wider range of problems that students encounter, but for the purpose of facilitating administration, we chose multiple-choice items. From the perspective of preparing further research, it would be appropriate to include qualitative research methods that would help to understand the depth of the phenomenon under investigation.

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DEVELOPING PHONEMIC AWARENESS AS A MEANS OF INCLUSION FOR CHILDREN FROM SOCIALLY DISADVANTAGED BACKGROUNDS¹

Rozvoj fonematického uvedomovania ako cesta k inklúzii detí zo sociálne znevýhodneného prostredia

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Abstract: The development of language skills in early childhood is an important factor influencing the successful integration of children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds into the school environment. The paper focuses on the issue of phonemic awareness as a key factor in the development of early reading literacy. The aim is to present possibilities for stimulating and developing phonemic awareness in preschool children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds in inclusive education. We consider Phonemic Awareness Training, which represents a comprehensive methodology for development in this area, to be a key tool in the development of phonemic awareness. At the same time, we point out how targeted support for these language skills in preschool age can contribute to school success and the effective inclusion of children whose language skills are less developed. Another part of the paper presents the interpretation of a partial results from the pilot testing of the pre-test, which focused on deficits in phonemic awareness among children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, specifically marginalized Roma communities.

Keywords: phonemic awareness, inclusion, socially disadvantaged backgrounds, early reading literacy.

Abstrakt: Rozvoj jazykových zručností už v predprimárnom období je u detí zo sociálne znevýhodneného prostredia významným faktorom, ktorý ovplyvňuje úspešné začlenenie do školského prostredia. Príspevok sa zameriava na problematiku fonematického uvedomovania ako kľúčového faktora v rozvoji ranej čitateľskej gramotnosti. Cieľom je prezentovať možnosti stimulácie a rozvoja fonematického uvedomovania u detí predškolského veku zo sociálne znevýhodneného prostredia v podmienkach inkluzívneho vzdelávania. Za kľúčový nástroj v rozvoji fonematického uvedomovania považujeme Tréning fonematického uvedomovania, ktorý predstavuje komplexnú metodiku rozvoja danej oblasti. Zároveň poukazujeme na to, ako cieľená podpora týchto jazykových schopností v predškolskom veku môže prispieť k školskej úspešnosti a efektívnej inklúzii detí, u ktorých sú jazykové schopnosti rozvinuté v nižšej miere. Druhá časť príspevku je zameraná na interpretáciu parciálnych výsledkov pilotného testovania pre-testu, ktorý bol zameraný na identifikáciu deficitov v oblasti fonematického uvedomovania detí zo sociálne znevýhodneného prostredia, konkrétne z marginalizovaných rómskych komunít.

Kľúčové slová: fonematické uvedomovanie, inklúzia, sociálne znevýhodnené prostredie, raná čitateľská gramotnosť.

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Introduction

Reading is considered to be the integral part of our everyday life and goes hand in hand with other skills that are needed to be taught for life. It's not just fundamental part, but also *"a gateway to enlightenment and empowerment"* (Manuel, 2025, p. 112). In this way, it is important to consider the development of reading competence from the early years, especially among children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. A substantial body of empirical research has demonstrated that the development of phonemic awareness constitutes a significant predictor of later reading achievement in children (eg. Elbro, Petersen, 2004; Elbro, Jensen, 2005; Thangarajathi, Menaha, 2020; Medina, Guimarães, 2021). Issa (2020) describes phonemic awareness (PA) as the ability to notice, identify, distinguish, combine, divide and manipulate with the phonological structure of words at the level of sentences, words and syllables. Ehri (2022) considers phonemic awareness to be the ability to focus on, distinguish, separate, and manipulate phonemes (individual speech sounds) within the pronunciation of individual words. Phillips et al. (2008) provide specific examples of indicators of PA, including segmentation, defined as a child's ability to recognize that the word *'hat'* consists of three sounds (phonemes), and blending, which refers to the ability to combine the sounds /p/ /i/ /g/ to form the word *'pig'*. To become a proficient reader and be adequately prepared for later life, a child has to begin developing literacy skills from an early age, a process in which kindergarten also plays a crucial role.

When discussing PA and its acquisition in preschool age, Smolík, Seidlová Málková (2014) are using the terms phonological awareness or phonological sensitivity, understanding the construct as the ability to recognize and manipulate the individual sounds that make up words. Mikulajová (2020) states that preschool-aged children are only able to acquire the simplest operations in the area of phonological awareness, such as syllabification, rhyming or isolating the first sound in words, while more complex operations require targeted learning. The importance of developing the phonological aspect of speech in pre-primary education is also emphasized in the Education Program for Pre-primary Education (2022), in which the educational area of Language and Communication explicitly includes the subarea of phonological processes and phonological awareness. In contrast, the 2008 Education Program for Pre-primary Education did not incorporate this category, which highlights the importance of developing those skills in pre-primary settings. Performance standards in this area focus on rhythmic accompaniment, rhyming words, dividing words into syllables and isolating the first sound in a word. In kindergarten, based on the Education Program, in the area of early reading literacy development, emphasis is also placed on working with books and identifying certain letters of the alphabet.

Based on the above, we can conclude that letter recognition, working with books and phonological awareness are key elements in the process of early literacy development in the environment of kindergarten. In pre-primary settings, the central focus is mainly on developing graphomotor and visuomotor skills using various worksheets rather than developing phonemic awareness and word games. Our considerations are further supported by the available materials for the development of pre-reading literacy, which address phonemic awareness only to a limited extent (Martišová, 2013; Králiková et al., 2014; Tomášková, 2015).

Children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds

Pretorius et al. (2004) highlight that if a child is raised in an environment that lacks literacy stimulation, the development of literacy within the school settings becomes an extremely critical factor. Roberts et al. (2005) argue that children from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds have less frequent contact with books, which represent an important element in the development of early reading literacy. Buckingham et al. (2014) draw attention to the fact that socially deprived environments and weakened reading skills are one of the current problem in education. Initial reading proficiency requires the development of phonemic awareness and the acquisition of oral competence and vocabulary, both of which are influenced by genetic factors and the environment. Children from families with lower socioeconomic status are at greater risk of cognitive deficits caused by insufficient stimulation of basic functions, which is later reflected in reading literacy. Peixoto et al. (2023) state that the concept of a socially disadvantaged environment is not considered a learning disorder, even though children who grow up in those settings are at risk of poorer academic performance, such as reading or writing. Based on the evidence presented, the environment in which a child grows up can be regarded as a significant factor influencing children's reading and literacy skills. The concept of socially disadvantaged backgrounds may be defined as an environment that, due to social and linguistic conditions, does not sufficiently stimulate the development of the individual's mental and emotional qualities, does not adequately promote effective socialization and fails to provide sufficient and appropriate stimuli for the development of personality (Klein, Rosinský, 2007). In the context of preschool preparation and subsequent school entry, Hlebová (2024) identifies one of the key shortcomings of children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds as a lack of adequate proficiency in the Slovak language upon school entry. Those children typically use only the language spoken within the family, their mother tongue, Roma language. The author further notes that only a small proportion of pupils enter the first grade as bilingual, with competence in both Roma language and, to a limited extent, Slovak language. Similarly, Kaleja (2011) emphasizes that

the mother tongue of Roma pupils is Roma language, provided that their parents or relatives communicate with them mostly in this language. This underscores the need to develop language competence and vocabulary from the preschool stage, in order to support more successful school adaptation later on.

Many researchers (Bowey, 1995; Duncan, Seymour, 2000; Hecht et al., 2000; Nancholis et al., 2005; Diuk et al., 2018) have stated that there is a delay in phonological awareness and literacy development in children with lower socioeconomic status or deprived backgrounds in comparison to intact children. In such environments, children often face specific life conditions, including poorer health and nutrition, demonstrating lower social competence and reduced motivation to learn (Fisher, 1992). They are frequently raised in a single-parent household, experience poverty and have parents with lower levels of education and familial literacy (Bowey, 1995). In the domain of literacy, these children commonly exhibit deficits in spoken language, limited awareness of letter-sound associations (Locke et al., 2002), and delays in word recognition tasks (Duncan, Seymour, 2000). Therefore, these findings indicate a substantial need for targeted support in the area of phonemic awareness among children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Such interventions have the potential to enhance overall language development, facilitate smoother school adaptation and promote higher levels of classroom participation, thereby contributing to greater educational inclusion.

The following part of the paper focuses on the interpretation of the partial findings obtained from the pilot testing of the pre-test. The aim of the research is to verify the effectiveness of a targeted training and intervention program in developing phonemic awareness among preschool children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, as a foundation for the early acquisition of reading literacy. The research objective is going to be addressed through the method of qualitative experimental intervention design, comprising three successive phases: pre-testing – intervention – post-testing. The present paper presents and discusses the outcomes of the pilot pre-test.

Methodology

Pre-test description

The pre-test, which was used to assess the level of phonemic skills in children before and after training, focuses on the basic components of phonemic awareness and auditory perception, which are auditory analysis and synthesis. These include isolation of the initial and final phonemes, blending sounds, discrimination of pseudowords, syllabification of words, rhyming words, auditory memory and figure-ground differentiation. When creating the pre-test and post-test, we collected several tests for stimulating or diagnosing auditory abilities (Matejček,

1978; Bednářová, Šmardová, 2007; Bednářová, 2022; Bednářová, Šmardová, 2022), as well as standardized tests for phonemic awareness (Mikulajová, 2012; Caravolas et al., 2018). The pre-test was designed based on the tasks found in the Phonemic Awareness Training methodology developed by D. B. El'konin (Mikulajová et al., 2023). This training consists of two stages: the pre-grapheme stage and the grapheme stage. In the subsequent phase of the research we are going to implement that Training, specifically pre-grapheme stage, within the children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, specifically marginalized Roma communities, in order to improve their PA skills.

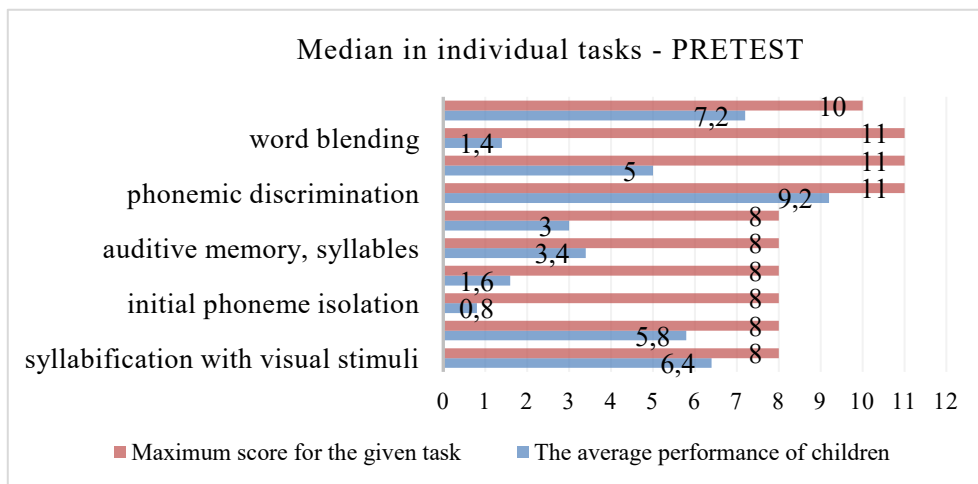
The pre-test is presented in the form of a story about a Rabbit and consists of ten tasks. The child's task is to solve problems that help the Rabbit find its way home across the playing field. The story presents motivational element that encourages preschool children to complete the tasks in a playful and engaging manner. We have also prepared a playing field for the story, which the Rabbit must cross to get to his house. There are 10 tasks marked on the playing field (each task represents a different component of phonemic awareness/auditory perception). For tasks 3, 6, and 10 we have also marked a reward in the form of a sweet treat or preferred activity chosen by the child.

Interpretation of partial results from pilot testing of the pre-test

Pilot testing was conducted in kindergarten in eastern Slovakia. The participants were five preschool children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, specifically from marginalized Roma communities. They were between 5 and 6 years old and attended the final year of kindergarten. The pre-test was administered individually to each child, taking into account their respective abilities. In the initial phase, the children were observed and relationship was established. All of the children were coming from the same village, and thus shared a similar environment and comparable family conditions. We had been attending the kindergarten from two to three times per week over the course of one month. During the pilot testing, we identified several findings that helped us to refine and improve our pre-test including shortening individual tasks, providing more visual support and dividing the pre-test into smaller segments.

The following figure presents the pre-test results, shown as median scores for the individual tasks. Scores are presented for tasks: rhyming, word blending, phonemic discrimination words/pseudowords, auditive memory words/syllables, initial and final phoneme isolation and syllabification.

Figure 1 Median in individual tasks



(Source: own compilation)

The presented graph displays the children's performance across each of the administered phonemic awareness tasks. The graph reports the median score for each individual task. The blue bars are representing the children's average performance on each task, while the orange bars indicate the maximum attainable score. As shown in the graph, the most pronounced deficits occurred in tasks targeting the isolation of the first and last vowel, as well as in word-blending tasks. The children performed well on tasks assessing syllabification and phoneme discrimination in real words. In contrast, their performance on phoneme discrimination tasks involving pseudowords showed considerably greater difficulties.

The smallest difference between the mean and the maximum score appears in the first task, focused on syllabification with visual support, which the respondents completed with the highest success rate. In this task, we also observed that children found it easier to syllabify longer words than shorter ones. The most pronounced difference is observed in the third task, phoneme discrimination of pseudowords, where the median score is six points below the maximum value. Deficits were occurring mainly in words with phonetically similar sounds. A notable difference also occurred in the fifth task, auditory memory.

The following table summarizes the most problematic tasks, including a description of the instructions given to the children and the most frequently observed deficits.

Table 1 Description of deficits in phonemic awareness

Task	Description	Deficits Observed
Initial phoneme isolation	"What sound do you hear at the beginning of the word?"	Many children had difficulty correctly identify initial sounds, often responding by simply repeating the words
Final phoneme isolation	"What sound can you hear at the end of the word?"	Difficulties with recognizing end sounds were frequent, often responding by simply repeating the words
Word Blending	"Say D-O-G, what word is D-O-G?"	Several children found blending individual sounds into words challenging, often responding by simply repeating the individual sounds without synthesis
Pseudoword Discrimination	"Are those words the same, or can you hear any difference?"	Some confusion observed in discriminating similar pseudowords (eg. všep – fšep, čint – čind...)
Auditive Memory	"Repeat after me, what I say. What can you hear?"	Lower scores indicated challenges in auditory memory tasks

(Source: own compilation)

The presented table shows the description of the most deficient tasks that children were dealing with during the pre-test. During the pilot testing, we also identified several recurring characteristics and deficits among children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, specifically from marginalized Roma communities. One of the most prominent observations was letter and sound inversion, which occurred both in spontaneous conversation and during the pre-test phase. For instance, one participant consistently produced the word "*SPIK*" instead of "*PSÍK*," indicating an inversion of the consonants /ps/ to /sp/. Despite repeated attempts, the child experienced significant difficulty in producing the correct phonological form. In addition to phoneme inversion, the children demonstrated greater ease in syllabification tasks when supported by visual stimuli, suggesting a reliance on visual cues to facilitate phonological processing. To our surprise they were able to syllabicate longer words more successfully than shorter ones. Furthermore, weakened attentional capacity was frequently observed during task performance, manifesting as difficulty maintaining focus

over extended periods. Due to that fact, the administration of the pre-test had to be segmented into several shorter sessions, which were conducted individually with each child. Despite these challenges, the children displayed a notable willingness and enthusiasm to learn new words, indicating motivation and openness to language learning when provided with appropriate support.

The following table provides an overview of the individual tasks (variables) along with the performance of each respondent across the assessed tasks. In accordance with ethical principles, anonymized codes were assigned to the participants (D1, D2, D3, D4, D5). For each task, the table presents a comparison between the score achieved and the maximum possible score for each task. This overview highlights both deficits in phonemic awareness and the individual strengths demonstrated by each participant.

Table 2 Phonemic awareness results from the pre-test

Respondents / Variables	D1	D2	D3	D4	D5
Isolation of the initial sound	3 / 8	0	1 / 8	0	0
Isolation of the final sound	6 / 8	0	2 / 8	0	0
Blending of sounds	3 / 11	0	0	2 / 11	2 / 11
Pseudoword discrimination	5 / 11	2 / 11	7 / 11	3 / 11	8 / 11
Word discrimination	9 / 11	10 / 11	9 / 11	8 / 11	10 / 11
Word syllabification	14 / 16	7 / 16	16 / 16	14 / 16	10 / 16
Word rhyming	7 / 10	6 / 10	9 / 10	6 / 10	8 / 10
Auditory memory, syllables	2 / 6	5 / 6	3 / 6	5 / 6	4 / 6
Auditory memory, words	5 / 5	2 / 5	3 / 5	3 / 5	2 / 5
Figure-ground differentiation	5 / 6	8 / 6	6 / 6	5 / 6	9 / 6

(Source: own compilation)

The pilot pre-test results of the participants, in children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (marginalized Roma communities), indicate deficits primarily in the areas of phoneme isolation, phoneme blending, pseudoword discrimination and auditory memory. For example in tasks that were focusing on initial and final phoneme isolation we were asking children what can you hear at the beginning or at the end of the word. Two respondents were able to isolate the first and last sounds, while for three other respondents we terminated the test

after four unsuccessful attempts (as specified in the test instructions). We noted that the children mostly repeated the words (which was the first task), but when they had to isolate a sound, they repeated the word again. Respondent D1 managed to isolate the first sound in three words (ZIK, RAT, LUC) and respondent D3 managed to isolate the first phoneme in one word (MOCH). Respondent D1 was able to correctly isolate the last sound in six words (out of 8) (MIR, ZAL, TER, TAP, LUS, NYM) and respondent D3 in two words (ZAL, TAP). Composing words from isolated sounds proved to be a challenging task for the children. We terminated the test for two children after six unsuccessful attempts. Two words (out of 11) were identified by two respondents, D4 (LES, UCHO) and D5 (MYŠ, RAK), and respondent D1 was able to compose three words (LES, RAK, UCHO). We also noted deficiencies in the area of discrimination between pseudowords in words, where children frequently confused similar sounds. The most pronounced difficulty was observed with phonetically similar sounds, such as b-p, ž-š, t-d. For the word pair *bram-pram*, none of the respondents were able to perceive any difference. In the auditory memory task, syllables, children D2 and D4 were able to remember a maximum of 5 syllables (out of 6) and D1, D3, and D4 a maximum of three isolated words (out of 5). In the subsequent phase of the research, these domains will be systematically strengthened in order to promote more effective inclusion of the children in later school settings.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the pre-test and the finding that the initial level of knowledge of each child from a socially disadvantaged environment varies widely due to their disadvantage, we focused the intervention program on components that could develop this knowledge to the greatest extent possible. The intervention program will be focusing on deficient abilities across all tested domains, will enhance emergent literacy skills in preschool children promoting better adaptation and inclusion in school settings. The results point out to the need to develop and stimulate phonemic awareness, especially in the areas of isolating the first and last sound in a words, blending sounds and auditory differentiation of pseudowords, where we observed unsatisfactory results.

The aim of the work is to verify the effectiveness of the intervention program in the process of developing phonemic awareness in preschool children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds as a basis for the successful acquisition of early reading literacy. In order to achieve this goal, we need to know the initial situation of the children and their areas of deficit (through a pre-test), on the basis of which we created and modified the intervention program for each respondent with aim to meet their individual needs. We will also continuously develop the other skills, which results were satisfactory (spelling, rhyming words, figure-

ground differentiation) in all children, focusing on individual areas as needed. The training also contributes to the enrichment of children's vocabulary, as they demonstrate a strong motivation for acquiring new knowledge. Moreover, the development of phonemic awareness may reduce linguistic and cognitive barriers among children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, thereby supporting their successful inclusion in early education settings.

Among the limitations of this research we may rank diverse mother tongue (Roma language) among participants, which may influence language processing and learning both in kindergarten and in later primary school education. The results suggest that effective work with these children requires additional time, the establishment of mutual trust, and the application of a systematic, continuous and individualized intervention approach. Among the additional limitations, behavioral difficulties were observed, which may be attributed to the children's limited prior exposure to a structured school environment. For most participants, this represented their first year in such a setting, requiring significant adaptation. Consequently, these adjustment demands may have contributed to the emergence of problem behaviors.

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PERSONALISED CURRICULUM AS A PATHWAY TO INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS FROM THE CZECH REPUBLIC AND SWEDEN¹

Personalizované kurikulum ako cesta k inkluzívnemu vzdelávaniu: Komparatívne pohľady z Českej republiky a Švédska

Jana Kožárová²

Abstract: The concept of a personalised curriculum represents a strategic framework for advancing inclusive education, particularly in addressing the diverse needs of learners with special educational requirements. Drawing on comparative analysis of curriculum models in the Czech Republic and Sweden, the study examines structural and pedagogical mechanisms that facilitate individualised learning pathways. The Czech approach is defined by a dual-level curriculum system with explicit support measures, including minimum recommended learning outcomes tailored to students with mild intellectual disabilities. In contrast, the Swedish model emphasises decentralisation, learner autonomy, and flexible instructional environments, underpinned by national values of equity and democratic participation. Key dimensions of effective personalisation—such as learner agency, differentiated pacing, formative assessment, and contextual responsiveness—are identified as critical to fostering inclusive learning environments. The findings highlight the necessity of professional competence among educators and institutional readiness to implement adaptive curricular strategies that promote equity and engagement across diverse student populations.

Keywords: Personalised curriculum, inclusive education, differentiated instruction, educational equity, curriculum policy, Czech Republic, Sweden.

Abstrakt: Koncept personalizovaného kurikula predstavuje strategický rámec pre rozvoj inkluzívneho vzdelávania, najmä pri riešení rozmanitých potrieb žiakov so špeciálnymi výchovno-vzdelávacími potrebami. Na základe komparatívnej analýzy kurikulárnych modelov v Českej republike a Švédsku štúdia skúma štrukturálne a pedagogické mechanizmy, ktoré umožňujú individualizované vzdelávacie dráhy. Český prístup je charakterizovaný dvojúrovňovým kurikulárnym systémom s explicitnými podpornými opatreniami, vrátane minimálnych odporúčaných vzdelávacích výstupov prispôbených žiakom s ľahkým intelektovým znevýhodnením. Naproti tomu švédsky model zdôrazňuje decentralizáciu, autonómiu žiaka a flexibilné edukačné prostredie, ktoré sú podopreté národnými hodnotami rovnosti a demokratickej participácie. Kľúčové dimenzie efektívnej personalizácie – ako agentnosť žiaka, diferencované tempo učenia, formatívne hodnotenie a kontextová citlivosť – sú identifikované ako zásadné pre podporu inkluzívneho vzdelávacieho prostredia. Zistenia poukazujú na nevyhnutnosť profesionálnej kompetencie pedagógov a inštitucionálnej pripravenosti implementovať adaptívne kurikulárne stratégie, ktoré podporujú rovnosť a angažovanosť v rámci rôznorodých skupín žiakov.

Kľúčové slová: personalizované kurikulum, inkluzívne vzdelávanie, diferencovaný didaktický prístup, rovnosť vo vzdelávaní, tvorba kurikula, Česká republika, Švédsko.

Introduction

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The innovative nature of personalised curricula, when combined with the use of technology, is that it provides students with the opportunity to learn anywhere, at any time, and in any way. It encompasses methodologies for evaluating existing knowledge and interests, customising learning according to individual styles, providing continuous feedback, and adapting to varied learning speeds. In the field of education, the adoption of a personalised curriculum enables educators to amalgamate diverse pedagogical approaches, thereby customising learning material to align with the unique characteristics and requirements of each learner (Peterson et al., 2018).

Theoretical framework

A personalised curriculum acknowledges the heterogeneity amongst students in terms of learning styles, educational needs and pace. It is also important to note that students differ in their prior knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values, and the programme provides different options for "starting their educational trajectory," thus allowing students a degree of choice to tailor their learning to their individual needs. A personalised curriculum is one in which students are provided with learning resources that match their unique interests and needs. Furthermore, it has the capacity to render learning more engaging and motivating. This pedagogical approach has the potential to enhance student performance, foster overall well-being, and promote engagement in the learning process (OECD, 2006). In order to reap the full benefits of a personalised curriculum, students must assume an active role in their own learning process, demonstrating the capacity for self-regulation and cultivating the metacognitive skills essential for independent learners. It is evident that educators can adapt their pedagogical approach to align with the distinct interests and characteristics of their students, as evidenced by the feedback they receive from these students. Furthermore, educators are able to continuously personalise lesson plans, thereby ensuring that these plans remain both challenging and coherent. This is achieved by selecting the most appropriate types and levels of challenges for students, thus facilitating their growth. This is of particular importance in order to circumvent the stigma often associated with such a curriculum, which can be perceived as substandard on account of its association with diminished parental aspirations and teacher bias.

A growing body of research suggests that differences in prior knowledge, dispositions, motivation, learning pace, and learning process can influence how students learn best (Dumont et al., 2010). The context in which learning takes place is equally important. A learning environment characterised by an intellectually challenging curriculum and a teaching approach that promotes interest, meaningfulness, and challenge through developmentally appropriate

cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement, especially during periods of increasing autonomy, is precisely what defines a personalised curriculum (Eccles et Roeser, 2011).

When implemented correctly, personalised curricula have the potential to transform the structure of the curriculum from a linear learning model to a differentiated, non-linear learning trajectory model that can benefit all students (OECD, 2021). The non-linear model of learning trajectories is thus consistent with the aforementioned assertion that students enter the educational system with disparate levels of knowledge and skills, and that it is not possible for students to have the same starting point. However, in order to achieve the desired level upon reaching ISCED 1 and 2, a personalised curriculum offers teachers the opportunity to adapt the content of education to individual students so that it benefits all participants in the educational process.

When implemented correctly, personalised curricula have the potential to transform the structure of the curriculum from a linear learning model to a differentiated, non-linear learning trajectory model that can benefit all students (OECD, 2021). The non-linear model of learning trajectories is thus consistent with the aforementioned assertion that students enter the educational system with disparate levels of knowledge and skills, and that it is not possible for students to have the same starting point. However, in order to achieve the desired level upon reaching ISCED 1 and 2, a personalised curriculum offers teachers the opportunity to adapt the content of education to individual students so that it benefits all participants in the educational process.

Despite the mounting interest in the potential of personalised curricula, many teachers still feel inadequately prepared to adapt their practices to meet the individual needs of all students on a regular basis. According to the results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the average proportion of students in OECD countries who are enrolled in schools where principals report that student learning is impeded by teachers' inability to cater to the diverse needs of their pupils is approximately 30 % (OECD, 2019).

As stated in the OECD Annual Report (2021), there is a possibility that, when implementing a personalised curriculum, teachers may lack awareness, willingness, or ability to respond sensitively to the needs of their students. In this regard, the capacity of educators to discern and address the diverse learning requirements of their students assumes paramount importance. It is imperative to recognise that school principals may possess elevated expectations regarding the capacity of teachers to respond to the needs and interests of students, and to support their learning by adapting the curriculum at the classroom level.

In the event that educators are granted the autonomy to adapt the

curriculum to a student-centred model, it is incumbent upon them to employ their professional judgment to assess their students' potential, establish boundaries, and provide guidance to facilitate a "negotiated learning plan" that culminates in productive and efficacious learning, benefiting both the individual students and the collective (OECD, 2020b).

Personalised curricula have been implemented in a number of countries, including Australia, the United States, the Czech Republic, Sweden and France. For the purposes of this analytical report, two countries were selected for the analysis of curricula that follow a personalised paradigm: the Czech Republic and Sweden.

The Czech Republic shares cultural affinities with the Slovak Republic. Concurrently, it serves as a compelling exemplar of the integration of a personalised curriculum within the Czech education system. This system ensures the inclusion of all students, including those with mild mental disabilities, into mainstream education through the implementation of a minimum recommended level for adjustments to expected outcomes.

The Swedish education system is widely regarded as being among the most effective in the world. The country's commitment to individual education and the personal liberty to select different educational institutions has led to the perception that Sweden possesses a highly advanced educational infrastructure and one of the most egalitarian education systems in existence. This perception is further substantiated by the significantly higher probability of academic success among Swedish students in comparison to their counterparts in other educational systems. Sweden's education system is characterised by its decentralised nature, with educational goals and outcomes defined centrally. The government is responsible for setting the framework for education at all levels, but local authorities, as founders, are responsible for organising most education from preschool to upper secondary education.

Czech Republic

The Czech Republic has Framework Educational Programs (FEP) at the national level and School Educational Programs at the school level. As with Slovakia, this is a two-level curriculum model, i.e. a framework set by the state with room for modification or additions by the school.

The FEP establishes specific objectives, forms, duration and compulsory content of education, its organisational structure, professional profile, conditions for the course and completion of education, and principles for the creation of school education programs. The RVP delineates the parameters for the education of pupils with special educational needs (SEN), encompassing the requisite material, personnel, and organisational conditions. In accordance with the provisions stipulated within the FEP, educational institutions are obligated to

formulate their own implementation program documentation, which encompasses school educational programs. These programs are required to adhere to the stipulations outlined within the RVP. The content of education can be organised into subjects or other comprehensive parts of the curriculum (modules, for example) in the school education program. The school education programme is characterised by the establishment of specific objectives, duration, forms, content, and schedule for education. Furthermore, it establishes the criteria for admission of applicants, the structure and completion of education, including the provisions for the education of pupils with SEN (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic, 2021).

The framework educational programme must allow for the modification of educational content and conditions for the education of students with SEN, as well as students with general intellectual giftedness. At the content level, it is possible to adapt the educational areas to the abilities of these pupils and to include subjects that are of a special educational support nature (e.g., speech therapy, speech training, spatial orientation and independent movement for persons with sensory impairments, development of social skills, etc.) in the educational process. The instruction of information and communication technologies, in addition to their practical application, constitutes a compulsory component of the current framework educational programs at all levels of education. Within the educational framework of the Czech Republic, a multifaceted approach to pedagogy is employed, encompassing the integration of standard classroom settings with those specifically designed to cater to the needs of disadvantaged student groups. This inclusive educational model is implemented across all levels of the education system, underscoring a commitment to address the diverse learning requirements of pupils.

Disadvantaged pupils (with the exceptions listed below) receive education in schools at all levels according to framework educational programmes. Pupils with mild mental disabilities are educated at the pre-primary, primary and secondary levels in accordance with standard framework educational programmes. However, the content of their education may be adapted within an individual educational plan, in accordance with recommendations made by the school counselling facility. Concurrently, the FEP delineates the designated "minimum recommended level for adjustments to expected outcomes within the framework of support measures" specifically for them, which can be regarded as an acceptable deviation for pupils with SEN from generally applicable educational standards (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic, 2021). *Minimum recommended level for adjustments to expected outputs under support measures*

The educational content of each level of education is characterised by a set

of expected outcomes and a curriculum. Within the initial level, the educational content is further categorised into two periods: the first period encompasses grades 1 to 3, while the second period covers grades 4 and 5. The objective of this division is to facilitate the dissemination of educational content across individual grades within educational institutions.

The anticipated outcomes are activity-based, practically oriented, applicable in everyday life, and verifiable. The definition provided herein concerns the ability of students to apply the knowledge they have acquired in practical situations and in everyday life. This ability is defined at the conclusion of grades 5 and 9. To facilitate identification, the expected outcomes are marked with codes that contain either the abbreviation of the field of education, the grade designation, the numerical designation of the subject area, and the number determining the order of the expected outcome in the given subject area.

The expected outcomes of the FEP for elementary education at the conclusion of the 5th grade (2nd period) and 9th grade establish a mandatory benchmark for the development of outcomes in the curriculum of the school educational program, which are to be achieved by the end of the 1st and 2nd stages of basic school. The anticipated outcomes at the conclusion of the third grade (first period) stipulate solely an illustrative (non-binding) benchmark. In the process of formulating the outcomes within the curriculum of the school education programme, they are intended to facilitate (at the initial stage) the establishment of the educational trajectory that will culminate in the realisation of the anticipated outcomes at the end of the fifth grade.

The minimum recommended level for adjustments to expected outcomes within support measures is adjusted expected outcomes, which are usually at a lower level than the corresponding expected outcomes for a given subject, thematic unit, etc. These outputs function as a reference point for any adjustments to the outputs specified in the school curriculum in the individual education plan (IEP) for the student, based on the recommendations of the school counselling facility and the student's legal representative. The outputs represent the target level, which may be exceeded through the implementation of support measures.

In accordance with the provisions stipulated in Decree No. 27/2016 Coll., the minimum recommended level outputs will be employed in the event of support measures being implemented from the third grade onwards, with the exception of pupils diagnosed with mild mental disabilities. The outcomes, adjusted in the IEP of pupils with mild mental disabilities based on the minimum recommended level within the framework of support measures, are at a higher level than the expected outcomes set out in the FEP for special primary schools.

For the purpose of clear identification, the majority of minimum recommended level outputs are marked with the letter "p" and the code

corresponding to the expected output. In the absence of a directly related expected outcome in a given subject area, the minimum recommended level outcomes are not marked with a code and represent appropriate specific knowledge and skills that can be achieved even if the outcomes are modified. Expected outcomes for which no outcome is specified at the minimum recommended level may be omitted without replacement in the event of any adjustments to the outcomes in the IEP. If the outcome at the minimum recommended level is identical to the expected outcome, it is marked with the same code without the added letter "p".

The overarching framework for the content and organisational provision of elementary education for all pupils is defined by the FEP for elementary Education, which in turn forms the basis for the creation of the School Educational Program (SEP). According to the SEP, the education of all pupils at a given school is carried out. For pupils for whom first-level support measures have been recognised, the SEP is the basis for the creation of an IEP. The IEP and the pedagogical support plan are developed by the school.

At the IEP level, it is possible, upon the recommendation of a counselling facility (in cases specified in Annex No. 1 to Decree No. 27/2016 Coll.), as part of support measures, to adjust the expected outcomes set out in the SEP, or to adjust the educational content so as to ensure consistency between educational requirements and the actual abilities of pupils, and so that education is geared towards achieving their personal maximum.

Support measures IEP are utilised to adjust the expected outcomes set out in the SEP. This provision enables pupils who have been granted recognised support measures, within the parameters established by the Education Act and Decree No. 27/2016 Coll., to modify the anticipated learning outcomes, or, if deemed necessary, to adjust the curriculum selection.

For pupils for whom recognised support measures consisting of adjustments to educational content have been deemed necessary, the IEP may include special educational and pedagogical intervention, on the recommendation of the school counselling facility and in accordance with the principles of personalisation and differentiation of education. The number of teaching hours for intervention or special educational care subjects is specified in Annex 1 to Decree No. 27/2016 Coll, depending on the level of support. The time allocation for special educational care subjects is provided from the available time allocation.

Sweden

The compulsory education system in Sweden is characterised by a uniform structure, which corresponds to the levels of primary and lower secondary education (ISCED 1 and ISCED 2) as defined in the International Standard Classification of Education.

The curriculum for compulsory education, pre-primary education, and leisure centres is valid throughout the country. As stated in the introduction to the curriculum (Skolvereket, 2018), all schools should be grounded in the same fundamental values of democracy and human rights, and it is incumbent upon them to ensure that all pupils learn these values. It is imperative that school planning endeavours to provide pragmatic expression to the objectives and guidelines for education as outlined in the Education Act, the curriculum, and the syllabuses. The objectives of education are expressed as the knowledge, skills and attitudes that students should acquire during compulsory schooling. The selection of means and methods is not subject to any regulatory oversight; rather, it constitutes an integral component of the decentralised management framework that characterises the school system. The decision regarding the selection of means and methods is entrusted to the discretion of individual school administrators (OECD, 2020a).

The Swedish education system is predicated on the philosophy that all pupils have an equal right to personal development and educational experiences, as set out in Section 1 of the Education Act. The importance of inclusive education is emphasised, yet the rights of pupils requiring special support are not explicitly delineated. The present curriculum for compulsory schools does not utilise the term or concept of mainstreaming; rather, it advocates that all pupils should be educated in regular classes. In the event that this proves unfeasible, the school is obliged to articulate with utmost clarity the rationale behind exploring alternative avenues for the education of its pupils. This standpoint is of pivotal significance to the philosophical underpinnings of the institution's organisation and functioning.

It is estimated that only approximately 500 of the 950,000 pupils in compulsory education attend state special schools (Euridyce, 2020). Consequently, the majority of pupils requiring special educational support are educated in mainstream classrooms. In the event that this is not feasible, the school is obliged to state explicitly the reasons why other educational options for pupils should be considered. This standpoint is of considerable philosophical significance in the context of the organisation and functioning of childcare. As is evident from previous discussions, the prerequisites for including pupils in mainstream education have been the primary focus. However, there has been a shift in emphasis towards the need to justify segregated options for pupils.

In the Slovak education system, schools have a "student health team" equivalent to the school support team in the UK. This team consists of a representative of the local school board, student social care workers (i.e. school doctor, nurse, psychologist, counsellor) and teachers for children with special needs. The team's activities are primarily preventive in nature, with a focus on health promotion. In accordance with Section 25 of the Education Act (Skollagen, 2010), it is vital that pupils' progress in achieving educational goals is supported.

Should teachers, at the commencement of the academic year, form the opinion that a student is unlikely to meet the minimum knowledge requirements, they are obliged to report this to the school principal. In accordance with the provisions stipulated within the Education Act (Skollagen, 2010), the principal of the educational establishment is obligated to engage in consultation with the student health team with a view to identifying options for providing assistance to the student. For students requiring special support, teachers are obliged to develop an action plan (equivalent to an IEP in Slovakia) following consultation with the student, their parents, and special education teachers. This plan, which identifies the student's needs and the measures taken to meet them, is continuously evaluated and may be modified as the student progresses. The principal of the school is tasked with the responsibility of conducting a prompt evaluation to ascertain the particular requirements of the student. The action plan that has been developed, as well as the decision not to develop an action plan, may be appealed. Action plans are meticulously formulated for each student requiring special support, in close collaboration with teaching staff, parents, and the student themselves. These plans delineate the responsibilities of each participant in the development of the student's skills and knowledge.

The national curriculum is defined as the set of core values, responsibilities for various aspects of school activities, and educational goals that are in force within a nation's education system. Within these limits, each local authority/founder establishes a plan for its education system. Each educational establishment is bound by national objectives and overarching principles, yet it possesses the autonomy to organise the means to achieve these objectives according to its own prerogative. In this respect, it allows for a degree of autonomy in the allocation of staff, the categorisation of pupils based on age and proficiency, and, to a considerable extent, the selection of academic subjects. This assertion is corroborated by the school plan, a document that is mandatory for all educational institutions to formulate and appraise. In accordance with the state education program, all compulsory education is organised in such a way as to allow for individual solutions for all students. This approach serves to reinforce the influence and personal responsibility of pupils, while concomitantly taking

into account the needs and individuality of each pupil.

The organisation of school activities and the educational environment represent significant aspects of this development. It is imperative that all students achieve the objectives of a given subject, yet the manner in which they do so and the time allocated to this endeavour may vary. The school has been known to offer a variety of forms of assistance to students who encounter difficulties in achieving their objectives. It is acknowledged that the degree of independence of the founder is considerable, particularly in the context of close cooperation with the school. Consequently, the education of students with special needs can be organised in a variety of ways. The range of available support may include the following options:

- students who need special support have written action plans/equivalents to our IVP, developed in collaboration with the students themselves, their parents, and relevant professionals;
- teachers receive consultations from the school's special education teacher;
- the school special education teacher or assistant helps the teacher or works with the student for a longer or shorter period of time as part of larger group activities;
- the student receives teaching materials adapted to their needs;
- the student leaves the larger group for a limited time to work with the school special educator;
- the teaching assistant works with a student who needs special support, or in the student's classroom;
- the student who needs special support works in a group of students with similar needs for a longer or shorter period of time within the same school;
- teachers are supported by the local information center;
- resource centers at the local level can obtain support from an advisor from the National Agency for Special Education and Schools.

The Swedish curriculum, *Läroplan för grundskolans obligatoriska del, förskolans klass och fritidshemmets kursplan*, has been in force since July 2011 and underwent revisions in 2018 and 2019. The curriculum delineates the educational objectives and overarching principles that guide its implementation. Two categories of objectives can be distinguished: firstly, *those that should be aspired to*; and secondly, *those that are obligatory*. A further objective is to ascertain the direction in which the school is to be developed, with a view to ensuring the enhancement of its quality. The objectives that must be accomplished are

indicative of the minimum outcomes expected of students upon completion of their education. It is the responsibility of the educational establishment to ensure that students receive the necessary support to achieve these goals.

The curriculum is developed by the Swedish National Agency for Education (the equivalent of the National Institute for Education and Youth in Slovakia) and is subject to approval by the government. It delineates the overarching focus and substance of each discipline, while establishing the objectives to be accomplished in each subject, as well as the objectives to be achieved by the third, fifth, and ninth grades. Regulations concerning teaching methods and the utilisation of teaching aids (books, computers, etc.) are non-existent.

The personalised approach to curriculum development is demonstrated by the linkage of teaching plans to the values set out in the core curriculum and to the content of subjects and the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that students should have acquired by the end of compulsory education. The selection of teaching materials and methods is delegated to teachers and students. It is imperative that cooperation between school management and students in creating a school education programme based on the curriculum is included as an objective in the curriculum approved by the school management. The curriculum is considered to be one of the pillars of a personalised curriculum (OECD 2020a, 2020b, 2021).

Theoretically, teaching methods themselves are not subject to official regulation; however, the national curriculum recommends the use of exploratory and student-centred methods, an interdisciplinary approach, and thematic teaching. In practice, this signifies that students in Swedish schools select their own tasks and methods within their individual education plans. A number of schools adopt alternative pedagogical approaches, including Montessori and Waldorf methodologies. The curriculum underscores the significance of interaction between individual subjects; however, this assertion remains largely unelaborated. It is acknowledged that pupils may be taught in groups of the same age or in mixed-age groups. In accordance with the provisions stipulated within the Education Act, it is imperative that educators possess the requisite qualifications to teach their designated subjects. Exceptions to this protocol may be made in the event that there is a lack of suitably qualified staff.

Within the context of compulsory education, educators are at liberty to select and employ teaching materials, including but not limited to books, audiovisual resources, ICT, and so forth. There exists no compendium of obligatory literature. It is an established fact that educational institutions procure teaching materials from a variety of publishing houses and subsequently disseminate these materials to pupils at no cost. The utilisation of ICT as a tool for all types of learning and as an aid to teaching development is well-documented. The Swedish National Agency

for Education's website proffers a selection of complimentary online tools for educators who may wish to avail themselves of them.

Despite the absence of an official institution responsible for the production of teaching materials for mainstream schools, the National Agency for Special Education and Schools (*Specialpedagogiska skolmyndighe*) is responsible for the development and production of teaching materials for special education, with a primary focus on students with disabilities. Furthermore, the agency adapts products from regular commercial publishers so that students with different types and degrees of specific learning disabilities can use these materials. The agency's remit extends to the coordination of state support for teaching materials intended for the education of students with special needs.

Furthermore, there is an absence of official regulation pertaining to the number, scope, and frequency of homework assignments. The decision regarding the allocation of resources is entirely within the purview of the relevant school or teacher of the specific subject.

In Sweden, grades are allocated to pupils from the sixth grade onwards. This includes Sami schools (*sameskolan/schools for pupils of Sami nationality*), schools for pupils with intellectual disabilities (*särskolan*) (if grades are given), and special schools (*specialskolorna/health disadvantages other than intellectual disabilities*) from the seventh grade. The introduction of grades from the sixth grade occurred in the 2012/13 academic year; prior to this, grades were awarded from the eighth grade.

Should a school have concerns that a student will not achieve the objectives set out in the curriculum for the third, sixth, and ninth grades, it is the school's responsibility to develop a programme of measures to be taken. It is imperative that the student and their parents/guardians are given the opportunity to participate in the development of the programme. In the event that a student does not achieve success in a given subject, that subject will not be assigned a grade. Instead, a written assessment is prepared that identifies the student's abilities for further study.

It is an established fact that pupils automatically move up to the next grade each year. The school principal may, after consulting with the pupil's parents or at the request of the pupil's parents/guardians, decide that the pupil will not progress to the next grade, but this is exceptional. It is incumbent upon the educational establishment to adapt its pedagogical approach in order to ensure that pupils achieve the set objectives. In most cases, several additional support measures are utilised prior to the proposal that a pupil should not be promoted to the next grade. It is the prerogative of the school principal, during the academic year, to determine the placement of a student in a higher grade level, provided that the student is deemed to be gifted and this decision is consented to by the

parents of the student.

Upon completion of compulsory schooling, a report card is issued to the student, detailing their final grades in various subjects, subject groups, and elective subjects. All subjects are taught as courses that can last from several months to several years. Report cards are to be completed by the teacher and signed by the school principal. The grades on the report card issued in the ninth grade are determined using nationally developed assessment criteria in conjunction with the curriculum for each subject.

The total score of a student, which is used for applications to secondary schools, is calculated by taking the student's grades in subjects and converting them into numbers using the following conversion table: The numerical values assigned to these elements are as follows: E = 10, D = 12.5, C = 15, B = 17.5, and A = 20. It is evident that, in this particular instance, the maximum attainable score is 340 points for students who are undertaking 17 subjects. Depending on whether or not they elect to enrol in an additional language course in addition to the 16 compulsory subjects, students may be awarded between 16 and 17 grades. Students who have not studied any foreign languages, or who have studied Swedish or English in lieu of other languages, will have a maximum of 16 grades at their disposal. Consequently, they will be unable to attain a score in excess of 320.

The sixteen subjects used to calculate the total score must include three core subjects: English, Swedish, and mathematics. If a student fails any of the core subjects, they are not eligible to study at upper secondary school. However, the student can still attend an introductory program for upper secondary school (*introduktionsprogram*), either to gain competence in the core subjects and begin studying at upper secondary school, or to gain skills for entering employment.

Conclusion and suggestions for consideration

Despite the existence of dichotomies within differing perspectives on curriculum personalisation, there are some recurring elements that influence curriculum components and render them sufficiently flexible to address the following challenges:

- taking into account the needs and potential of the student,
- student responsibility for the learning process,
- recognizing the student's pace,
- assessing personal progress.

A personalised curriculum is predicated on an individual approach to each student. The importance of classroom work in observing different ways of

working and recognising diverse learning methods cannot be overstated.

The fundamental difference between the Czech Republic and Sweden is the degree of autonomy and centralisation. In the Czech Republic, the level and scope of support is explicitly defined in a catalogue of support measures, which is then reflected in the personalisation of the curriculum. In Sweden, the type and scope of support is not formally and explicitly defined.

Within the Czech Republic, each subject is subject to a precise delineation of the minimum recommended level of knowledge for pupils. In Sweden, there are four levels of knowledge. During the period of compulsory education, pupils are required to complete 16 subjects. In three of these subjects (English, Swedish, and mathematics), a certain grade must be achieved in order to progress to the next level of education. The summative assessment of grades, including those designated as 'E', is a pivotal factor in determining progression to the subsequent level of education. It is evident that the criterion of the sum of grades in Sweden is commensurate with the minimum recommended level in the Czech Republic.

The present study demonstrates that a personalised curriculum can serve as a practical lever for inclusion when structural arrangements and classroom pedagogy are coherently aligned to the diverse needs of learners with special educational requirements. A comparative analysis of the Czech and Swedish systems reveals two viable yet contrasting pathways. The Czech dual-level framework (FEP–SEP) anchors personalisation in explicitly codified support measures, including minimum recommended adjustments to expected outcomes for learners with mild intellectual disabilities. This provides teachers with clear reference points for adapting content and assessment. In Sweden, the implementation of decentralised governance and learner-centred planning (action plans co-constructed with students, families and specialists) has been shown to cultivate autonomy and flexible instructional environments grounded in national values of equity and democratic participation. In both contexts, effective personalisation is contingent upon learner agency, differentiated pacing, formative assessment, and responsiveness to local conditions, whilst ensuring that safeguards are in place against stigma through coherent expectations and transparent progress monitoring. The capacity to implement such changes remains pivotal. In order to translate policy into adaptive curricular practice that promotes equity, engagement, and progression for diverse student populations, sustained professional competence, multi-professional support structures, and institutional readiness are prerequisites. The functional equivalence between the Czech minimum recommended outcomes and Sweden's summative grade thresholds demonstrates that divergent accountability designs can ultimately converge on the same inclusivity objective, namely ensuring pathways that are

both personalised and standards-referenced.

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Section 2:

INCLUSION IN CZECH EDUCATION, INCLUDING A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES FROM OUR RECENT RESEARCH

INCLUSION IN MUSIC EDUCATION: QUALITATIVE INSIGHTS FROM EL SISTEMA AND RESIDENTIAL CHILDCARE CONTEXTS ¹

Inkluzívne hudobné vzdelávanie: Kvalitatívne poznatky z kontextu El Sistema a rezidenčnej starostlivosti o deti

Alois Daněk,² Dagmar Šafránková³

Abstract: This article examines inclusive music education through the lens of long-term qualitative research conducted in socially and educationally marginalised settings. The analysis draws on two interconnected domains: the El Sistema music and social programme and empirical work in residential childcare. Rather than approaching inclusion as a policy construct, the study attends to everyday practices and meanings emerging where music intersects with vulnerability and disrupted development. The research is grounded primarily in qualitative inquiry and informed by Participatory action research, drawing on interviews, participant observation, field documentation, and case-based analysis. Findings suggest that music can support participation, emotional regulation, and the formation of a coherent sense of self, while also revealing persistent structural and institutional constraints. Attention is paid to researcher personality and ethical complexity in these environments. The article argues that inclusion in music education is relational and context-dependent, and that qualitative approaches, including Participatory action research, are particularly suited to capturing this complexity, despite their limited generalisability.

Keywords: inclusive education, residential childcare, El Sistema, special education, Participatory action research, qualitative research.

Abstrakt: Tento článok skúma inkluzívne hudobné vzdelávanie cez prizmu dlhodobého kvalitatívneho výskumu realizovaného v sociálne a vzdelanostne marginalizovaných prostrediach. Analýza čerpá z dvoch prepojených oblastí: hudobného a sociálneho programu El Sistema a empirickej práce v oblasti ústavnej starostlivosti o deti. Namiesto toho, aby sa inkluzívnosť vnímala ako politický konštrukt, štúdia sa zameriava na každodenné praktiky a významy, ktoré vznikajú tam, kde sa hudba pretína s ohrozenosťou a narušeným vývojom. Výskum je založený predovšetkým na kvalitatívnom prieskume a participatívnom akčnom výskume, pričom čerpá z rozhovorov, pozorovania účastníkov, terénnej dokumentácie a analýzy konkrétnych prípadov. Zistenia naznačujú, že hudba môže podporovať účasť, emocionálnu reguláciu a formovanie koherentného pocitu seba samého, pričom zároveň odhaľuje pretrvávajúce štrukturálne a inštitucionálne obmedzenia. Pozornosť sa venuje osobnosti výskumníka a etickej zložitosti v týchto prostrediach. Článok konštatuje, že inklúzia v hudobnej výchove je vzťahová a závislá od kontextu a že kvalitatívne prístupy, vrátane participatívneho akčného výskumu, sú napriek svojej obmedzenej generalizovateľnosti obzvlášť vhodné na zachytenie tejto zložitosti.

Kľúčové slová: inkluzívne vzdelávanie, starostlivosť o deti v detských domovoch, El Sistema, špeciálne vzdelávanie, participatívny akčný výskum, kvalitatívny výskum.

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Introduction

Inclusion in music education is frequently emphasised in institutional and curricular discourse, yet its meaning becomes uncertain when confronted with the lived realities of marginalised childhoods. In contexts marked by disrupted attachment, educational discontinuity and restricted access to cultural participation, music is rarely experienced as a conventional enrichment subject. Instead, it appears as a fragile opportunity for connection, self-articulation and recognition, while at the same time remaining embedded in normative expectations that may inadvertently reproduce new forms of exclusion. Over the past decade, our research in this area has increasingly focused on environments where inclusion is not merely aspirational but ethically imperative. Two contexts are especially instructive. The first is the El Sistema music and social programme, internationally recognised for its ambition to combine musical training with broader social aims. The second is residential childcare, understood not only as an educational setting, but as a complex institutional environment shaped by instability, routine, and the enduring impact of adverse life experiences. Although both contexts articulate a promise of inclusion through music, they operate within markedly different social, cultural and emotional landscapes.

These distinctions invite a critical interrogation of what inclusion in music education involves in practice and whose experiences it meaningfully addresses. This article does not pursue a quantitative evaluation of effectiveness. It is grounded primarily in qualitative inquiry and informed by participatory action research, drawing on longitudinal field engagement, interviews, participant observation, reflective documentation and case-based interpretation. Attention is directed to the ways in which children and young people with diverse educational needs experience, interpret and, at times, resist musical participation, as well as to the institutional and relational conditions under which such experiences take place. Inclusion is thus approached not as a fixed or stable outcome, but as a situational and relational process, continually shaped through interaction. By foregrounding lived experience and contextual complexity, the article contributes to ongoing debates on the possibilities and limits of inclusive music education. It suggests that music can open spaces for agency, belonging and emotional expression, while remaining constrained by structural, organisational and pedagogical factors. Within this frame, qualitative approaches are shown to provide a necessary depth of understanding, capturing nuances and tensions that remain inaccessible to standardised, outcome-oriented perspectives.

El Sistema: music and social programme

El Sistema is a globally recognised music and social programme established in Venezuela in 1975 (Tunstall, 2013). Its founder, the musician and economist José Antonio Abreu, was firmly convinced that music could serve as an effective instrument of social change and as a response to processes of exclusion and marginalisation (Booth & Tunstall, 2014). At the time of the programme's inception, Venezuelan society was affected by deep poverty, rising unemployment and increasing levels of criminal activity. These conditions disproportionately affected the most vulnerable members of the population, particularly children, whose everyday lives were marked by instability, insecurity and a lack of meaningful opportunities for development.

In response to this situation, Abreu initiated a model of free, accessible music education aimed at children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Musical activity was conceived not merely as artistic training, but as a structured and protective environment capable of reducing social risks associated with violence, delinquency and disengagement. With the support of the Venezuelan government, Abreu established a national youth orchestra movement that came to be known as El Sistema, literally "The System". Its official institutional name was Fundación del Estado para el Sistema Nacional de las Orquestas Juveniles e Infantiles de Venezuela (FESNOJIV), which may be translated as the National Foundation for the System of Youth and Children's Orchestras in Venezuela (Tunstall & Booth, 2016). In later years, FESNOJIV was renamed the Simón Bolívar Music Foundation; however, the designation El Sistema has remained in widespread use in both professional and academic discourse.

From its earliest stages, the programme's social orientation was repeatedly emphasised. Music was positioned not as an end in itself, but as a medium through which social regeneration, human dignity and civic responsibility could be cultivated. Authors examining El Sistema frequently identify several foundational principles underpinning its philosophy, including the pursuit of social transformation, the central role of ensemble music-making, a high level of intensity in pedagogical practice, unrestricted accessibility and a strong emphasis on cooperation and community engagement (Booth, 2017; Govias, 2011).

At the core of the programme lies the idea of social change achieved through active participation in a collective musical body. Children and young people are not positioned as passive recipients of support, but as contributing members of an ensemble in which individual responsibility is inseparable from group cohesion. Musical excellence and social development are understood as mutually reinforcing processes rather than hierarchical or competing goals. Progress in one domain is seen as intrinsically linked to progress in the other.

Musical experience within El Sistema is gained primarily through ensemble

participation. The collective dimension is not a supplementary element but the defining pedagogical feature of the programme. Learning together, listening to one another, and contributing to a shared artistic outcome are presented as powerful pathways to acquiring both musical competence and social awareness. Through ensemble practice, participants encounter discipline, mutual respect and a sense of shared purpose that extends beyond individual achievement.

Rehearsals take place with considerable frequency and intensity. Regular meetings of orchestras and choirs are accompanied by rehearsals that often extend over several days each week. Public performance plays a significant role in the life of the ensemble, creating opportunities for participants to present their progress, experience recognition and build confidence in public settings. These performances are not framed as competitions, but as moments of collective affirmation and visibility within the community.

Accessibility is a defining ethical principle of El Sistema. Participation is free of charge and open to all children, regardless of social origin, prior musical experience or assessed talent. No entrance examinations are required. Instruments are provided, maintained and repaired by the organisation, thereby removing one of the most substantial barriers commonly associated with formal music education. Although the programme was primarily designed for those in situations of social disadvantage, no child is rejected on the basis of background or ability.

Cooperation extends beyond the internal structure of the ensemble. El Sistema actively seeks engagement with families, schools, local communities and other cultural institutions. Collaboration is understood as essential to the programme's sustainability and social impact. This openness is not limited to initiatives directly inspired by El Sistema, but reaches into the broader network of music education and cultural life, reinforcing the connection between artistic practice and the social environment in which it is embedded.

In the Czech Republic, several ensembles and initiatives have drawn inspiration from the ideas of El Sistema. Among the most prominent is the orchestra of the Harmony Foundation, which constitutes the primary focus of the present study. Its activities, organisational model and educational philosophy reflect many of the principles articulated by El Sistema, while simultaneously responding to the specific cultural, institutional and social conditions of the Czech context.

Another certainly interesting model implementing the El Sistema concept in the Czech Republic is also the activity of the association Vějíř (Kladno), which offers especially children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds to play a musical instrument with the possibility of later inclusion in the Vejir Orchestra. The lessons implement the methods and approaches of El Sistema and are one of

the ways not only to promote music education but also to prevent risky behaviour. We also encounter the implementation of El Sistema in a number of primary schools in the Czech Republic (projects, innovations, etc.), where not only the socio-cultural overlap of playing musical instruments together is evident, but also the inclusive and motivationally innovative way of teaching, supporting the perception of music and the development of music education without age, social and instrumental barriers.

Residential childcare as a context for musical experience

Residential childcare represents a highly specific educational and social environment in which everyday life is shaped by institutional routines, disrupted family trajectories and accumulated experiences of instability (Daněk et al., 2023, Stárek & Vlach, 2025). Unlike school contexts, which tend to be organised around relatively stable peer groups, curricular continuity and educational progression, residential childcare is marked by fluctuating group compositions, varying lengths of stay and biographies fragmented by repeated transitions. For many children, trust in adults, confidence in institutional structures and a positive relationship to learning have already been significantly compromised by earlier experiences of neglect, separation or rejection. These conditions fundamentally influence not only academic development, but also the ways in which children approach expressive, relational and creative domains, including music.

Within this setting, music assumes an ambivalent yet potentially powerful role. On one level, it may appear peripheral in relation to the immediate priorities of care, behavioural regulation and educational remediation. On another, it can become one of the few spaces in which children encounter continuity without explicit demands for verbal articulation, cognitive performance or behavioural self-monitoring. Musical engagement offers opportunities for non-verbal expression, for embodied participation and for the experience of shared attention that does not rely on narrative coherence or biographical disclosure. In this sense, music in residential childcare cannot be reduced to a curricular enrichment activity; it occupies a liminal space between education, emotion and relationship, shaped as much by context as by content.

Field experience suggests that children in residential care rarely approach music through the lens of formal musical training (Daněk, 2024). Their engagement tends to be situational, often spontaneous and closely linked to affective states, memories and the immediate social climate within the group. A melody may serve as a container for unarticulated emotion, a song may evoke associations with life beyond the institution, or rhythm may offer a channel for the release of accumulated tension. In group settings, musical activity can strengthen a sense of belonging through synchrony and shared structure, while at

the same time exposing vulnerabilities, hierarchies and patterns of comparison that reflect broader experiences of exclusion. These tensions are not incidental. They mirror the complex relational dynamics that characterise institutional life and the fragile nature of social trust within it (Arnadottir et al., 2025; Stárek & Vlach, 2025).

From the perspective of inclusive education, residential childcare therefore presents both a challenge and an opportunity. It challenges simplified narratives that portray music as inherently beneficial or universally accessible. At the same time, it offers a critical mirror through which the meaning of inclusion may be reconsidered. In this context, inclusion cannot be equated with mere participation or the physical presence of children in a musical activity. It must instead be understood in terms of subjective experience: whether children feel seen, heard and recognised through their musical engagement, whether they perceive themselves as legitimate participants, and whether music contributes to a sense of continuity in lives otherwise marked by disruption (Daněk, 2024).

At the structural level, the conditions of residential childcare impose clear constraints on any sustained musical programme. High staff turnover, limited access to trained music educators, restricted material resources and the constant negotiation of priorities between care, safety and education often limit the possibility of systematic and long-term musical engagement. Even when enthusiasm and commitment are present, discontinuity in personnel and in children's placement frequently interrupts developmental trajectories that would elsewhere support gradual musical growth. These realities render any prescriptive or standardised model of music education insufficient. What remains possible, however, are situated, responsive forms of musical practice that emerge in relation to the lived conditions of the environment (Daněk, 2025).

It is important to note that the present article is not intended to provide an extensive institutional or legislative analysis of residential childcare. Such aspects have been addressed in our previous research, where the system, its practices and its challenges have been examined in greater detail from pedagogical and psychosocial perspectives. Readers interested in a comprehensive contextualisation of residential childcare are therefore directed to these earlier publications (Daněk et al., 2023). In the current study, residential childcare functions primarily as a lived and experienced space in which musical encounters take place, rather than as the central object of institutional description.

The focus lies instead on how music is experienced, negotiated and attributed meaning within this environment. Attention is directed to the subjective and relational dimensions of musical engagement, as these are shaped by individual histories, interpersonal dynamics and the broader institutional climate. This emphasis on lived experience, situated meaning and relational

process directly informs the methodological orientation of the study. In order to access these dimensions with sufficient depth and sensitivity, the research is grounded in a qualitative framework and informed by principles of participatory action research. The following section therefore outlines the methodological foundations of the study, including its epistemological positioning, data collection procedures and analytical strategy. More generally, music can be considered both a therapeutic and educational framework (authors' note: music therapy and musicophilia). Our perspective, however, leans towards a more pedagogically inclusive approach (beyond just musicophilia). An individual's unique musical background intertwined with socio-cultural factors is always crucial in this context.

Research design

Across a series of studies devoted to the relationship between music and residential childcare, the research design has been deliberately shaped by the complexity, sensitivity and contextual specificity of the institutional environment (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013; Van Manen, 2018). Rather than relying on a single, fixed methodological model, the design evolved in response to the realities of the field and to the voices of children and professionals with lived experience of residential care. The guiding principle throughout this work has been to understand music not as an isolated educational variable, but as a situated, relational and culturally mediated practice embedded in everyday institutional life (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). The research has consistently been grounded in qualitative inquiry. This orientation reflects the conviction that the most significant dimensions of musical experience in residential childcare, including meaning-making, emotional resonance, belonging, resistance and identity construction, cannot be adequately captured through standardised measurement alone (Rajasinghe, 2020; Van Manen, 2018). Instead, they require interpretive approaches capable of engaging with ambiguity, contradiction and subjectivity. For this reason, the studies have predominantly employed an interpretive and constructivist stance, acknowledging that knowledge is co-created in interaction between the researcher and participants and that meaning emerges through contextually embedded interpretation (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021).

Participatory Action Research (PAR) has served as an overarching framework in a number of projects. Its relevance lies not only in its methodological orientation, but in its ethical and relational implications (Baum et al., 2006; McIntyre, 2008). In institutional environments where children's voices are frequently marginalised, PAR offers a structure through which participants may influence the direction of inquiry, reflect on their own experiences of music

and, in selected cases, become co-agents in shaping musical activity itself (Shamrova & Cummings, 2017; Flicker, 2008). Although the degree of formal participation has varied across individual studies, the underlying ethos has remained consistent: to approach children and young people not as objects of observation, but as subjects whose perspectives carry epistemic authority (Cornish et al., 2023).

Data have been generated in naturalistic settings through prolonged presence in the field. The design therefore prioritises ecological validity and attentiveness to everyday reality over experimental control (Grauer, 2012). Musical encounters were observed as they unfolded in ordinary routines, spontaneous interactions and organised activities within residential care. This long-term engagement made it possible to perceive not only momentary expressions, but also the gradual development of relationships, changes in attitudes towards music and shifts in patterns of participation over time (Sirris et al., 2022).

In several instances, a case-oriented logic was integrated into the design in order to allow for deep, contextualised insight into specific life situations (Carter, 2024; Shrestha & Bhattarai, 2021). These cases, including children who experienced forced displacement or repeated institutional transitions, were not selected for their representativeness but for their potential to illuminate critical aspects of inclusion, resilience and identity negotiation through music (Takahashi & Araujo, 2019). Such an approach is consistent with qualitative traditions that value analytic richness over numerical generalisation (Wohlin & Rainer, 2022).

Across all phases of the research, reflexivity has remained a central component of the design. The researcher's position in relation to the field required continuous reflection on presence, influence and interpretation, particularly in an environment structured by asymmetrical power relations (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). Rather than attempting to eliminate subjectivity, the design seeks to make it visible and accountable, thereby strengthening the transparency and trustworthiness of the knowledge produced (Alase, 2017).

This evolving qualitative design has provided a coherent yet flexible framework for exploring the lived significance of music in residential childcare. It has enabled a sustained examination of how musical experience intersects with institutional life, social positions and individual biographies, while remaining responsive to ethical complexity and the changing realities of the field (Jacobs & Hultdtgren, 2021; Shamrova & Cummings, 2017). This design forms the methodological foundation for the analyses presented in the following sections.

Qualitative Inquiry as a Meaning-Making Foundation for Inclusive Music Education

Inclusive music education is frequently discussed in terms of organisational strategies, curricular adaptations or differentiated teaching tools. Yet its most essential dimensions often remain hidden from formal frameworks, situated instead in the subtle textures of lived experience, relational presence and subjective meaning. Qualitative inquiry offers a mode of engagement capable of attending to these layers, not by imposing explanatory certainty, but by remaining with complexity, ambiguity and contradiction. Within this perspective, inclusion is approached not as a predefined outcome, but as a dynamic process that becomes intelligible only through attentive, context-sensitive and interpretive exploration. This perspective then offers a range of interpretative and innovative approaches to exploring the implementation of music within educational and inclusive activities, including transdisciplinary overlaps (e.g. positive reinforcement and relaxation training, ritual music programmes, support for individual and cooperative activities, educational practices, etc.).

Inclusion beyond access

In contemporary discourse on inclusive education, inclusion is often reduced to issues of access, participation rates, or the removal of visible barriers. While these dimensions are undeniably important, they offer only a partial and frequently misleading picture, especially in contexts such as residential childcare. Access to a musical activity does not, in itself, guarantee that a child experiences recognition, belonging, or safety within that activity. In practice, the same musical setting can be experienced as liberating for one child and as alienating or anxiety-provoking for another. This divergence cannot be understood through quantitative indicators or attendance records; it becomes visible only when attention is directed towards meaning, perception and lived experience.

Qualitative design makes it possible to approach inclusion not as a static condition, but as a situated and continuously negotiated process. Through observation, dialogue and interpretive engagement, it becomes apparent that inclusion in music education does not unfold in a linear trajectory. It is interrupted, fragile, sometimes temporary. Moments of connection may be followed by withdrawal, resistance or indifference. These fluctuations are not methodological “noise”; they are the very substance of inclusive experience in institutional life. Qualitative inquiry is uniquely capable of attending to these seemingly minor but deeply revealing shifts, allowing inclusion to be examined in its real, often contradictory, form rather than through idealised representations. In residential childcare, where personal histories are marked by discontinuity and rupture, inclusion must be understood against a background of unmet needs,

disrupted attachments and ambivalent trust in adults and institutions. The value of a qualitative approach lies in its capacity to place these dimensions at the centre of analysis without attempting to normalise or simplify them. It offers a language for recognising exclusion even when it is subtle, silent, or internalised. In doing so, it strengthens the inclusive paradigm by insisting that inclusion cannot be declared, measured or imposed, but only understood through attentive, context-sensitive inquiry. The philosophy of mutual acceptance in a community setting and full participation in society (including the development and modification of inclusive music education) is an inherent fact of the inclusive paradigm.

Music as an embodied and relational practice

Music in residential childcare cannot be approached solely as a pedagogical tool. It operates at the level of the body, memory and affect, often bypassing cognitive processes that dominate conventional educational evaluation. Children may not articulate in words what music evokes, yet their posture, their breathing, their willingness to remain in a shared space, or their decision to withdraw, all constitute meaningful data. These embodied responses are central to understanding how music functions in relation to inclusion, safety and self-perception. Qualitative methods enable researchers to attend to such embodied phenomena without forcing them into predetermined categories. Through sustained presence and careful interpretation, it becomes possible to observe how musical engagement mediates proximity and distance, connection and isolation, exposure and protection. A rhythm may ground a child who is visibly dysregulated. A familiar melody may trigger fear as well as comfort. Silence during a musical activity may reflect not disengagement, but a deeply internal process of listening, remembering or self-protection.

These layers of experience resist standardisation. They require an approach that honours ambiguity and accepts that meaning does not always resolve itself into clarity. In this regard, qualitative design is not a compromise prompted by the complexity of the setting. It is an epistemological necessity. Without it, music risks being reduced to an intervention rather than recognised as a relational event, shaped by the personal histories and emotional states of those who participate in it. At the same time, qualitative engagement reveals that music is not inherently inclusive. There are moments in which music reproduces hierarchies, intensifies feelings of inadequacy or reinforces existing exclusions within the peer group. These findings complicate overly optimistic narratives about the transformative power of music. Yet it is precisely in this complexity that the value of qualitative research becomes apparent. It allows music to be seen not as a solution, but as a site where inclusion and exclusion are negotiated in subtle and unpredictable ways. As well as a dynamic process of aligning emotional and social perceptions of oneself and others within an inclusive setting.

Voice, agency and the ethics of listening

One of the most significant contributions of qualitative design to the inclusive paradigm lies in its relationship to voice. In residential childcare, children's experiences are often interpreted, documented and evaluated by others. Their perspectives are mediated through professional language, institutional reports and external judgements. Qualitative inquiry, particularly when informed by participatory principles, offers a counter-movement: an attempt to listen rather than to classify. This listening, however, is neither simple nor unproblematic. Children do not always wish to speak. They may speak in fragments, in metaphors, in music rather than in words. They may test the listener's reliability, or protect themselves through silence. A qualitative, inclusion-oriented design recognises that these responses are meaningful in their own right. It understands that respect for agency includes the right to withhold, to remain ambiguous, or to express oneself in non-narrative ways. The ethical dimension of this process extends beyond informed consent. It involves an ongoing attentiveness to what is being asked, what is being given and what may be unintentionally taken. It requires recognition of the researcher's interpretive power and of the risk of transforming lived experience into data that serve academic goals more than the participants themselves. Within this tension, qualitative design demands a specific form of responsibility. Inclusivity is no longer only a feature of the educational environment, but also a criterion for the research process itself. In this sense, qualitative methodology does not merely study inclusive practices; it performs them. It practices patience, accepts uncertainty, and foregrounds relational sensitivity over procedural efficiency. These characteristics mirror the very qualities that inclusive music education seeks to cultivate. Cultivating inclusive education can then promote inclusive coexistence, mental and spiritual phenomena related to socio-cultural differences and individual peculiarities of music perception.

Acknowledging the limits of qualitative understanding

The strengths of qualitative inquiry must be considered alongside its inherent limitations. No matter how sensitive the approach, it cannot provide total access to internal experience. Meaning is always partially constructed, mediated by language, by memory, and by the presence of the researcher. Interpretations remain situated, provisional and open to revision. Generalisation, in its conventional statistical sense, is not the goal of this type of research. Instead, it offers transferability through depth, inviting readers to recognise resonances with their own contexts rather than universal truths. This form of knowledge may appear less certain, less definitive, and yet it is often more honest in its acknowledgement of complexity.

There is also the risk of over-interpreting significance, of attributing meaning where none is intended, or of romanticising resilience in order to counterbalance hardship. A rigorous qualitative design therefore requires continuous reflexivity, modesty in claims and a willingness to remain with unresolved questions. These limits should not be viewed as weaknesses. They are part of an ethical stance that refuses to simplify lives shaped by profound disruption. By confronting its own boundaries, qualitative research reinforces rather than undermines the inclusive paradigm. It recognises that inclusion is not an end-state to be reached, but an ongoing effort that must remain attentive to uncertainty, difference and incompleteness.

Implications for inclusive music education in practice

The insights generated through qualitative inquiry have implications that reach beyond research and into pedagogical reflection. They do not translate into rigid recommendations or standardised programmes. Instead, they suggest a shift in orientation. Music educators in residential and other vulnerable contexts may need to move away from a focus on performance outcomes and towards a deeper attention to presence, relationship and emotional attunement. Inclusivity in music education, seen through a qualitative lens, is less about perfect participation and more about creating conditions in which a child can enter and leave, approach and retreat, without shame or coercion. It involves an acceptance of irregularity, inconsistency and silence as legitimate forms of engagement. It asks educators to consider not only what is taught, but how space is held, how time is structured, and how difference is received. In this respect, qualitative research does not merely describe inclusive practice. It challenges the field to reimagine it. It shifts the question from “How can we include children in music?” to “How does music participate in children’s sense of self, safety and belonging?” The difference is subtle, yet profound. It is in this reframing that qualitative design reveals its most significant contribution to the inclusive paradigm in music education. Inclusively and educationally, it is an open concept or model that holistically understands the ethical limits of the environment, the influence of residential care and institutional culture, the space for sharing while providing a sense of safety, the freedom of choice and acceptance of natural responses, the emotional relationality and certain rituals of the musical situation and causal relationships.

Conclusion

This article has examined inclusion in music education as a lived, situational and relational process within the context of residential childcare. By placing the El Sistema music and social programme in conceptual dialogue with institutional experience, the study challenges simplified narratives of music as an inherently

inclusive or universally beneficial practice. Music is shown to open spaces for connection, emotional regulation and recognition, while simultaneously carrying the potential to evoke vulnerability, reproduce hierarchies or deepen feelings of exclusion. The qualitative and participatory design proved essential for accessing these nuances. It allowed inclusion to be understood not as a declared outcome, but as something that is continuously negotiated through subtle interactions, embodied responses and fragile moments of trust. In this sense, qualitative inquiry does not merely add depth to existing approaches; it reorients the very questions that are asked about music and inclusion, shifting attention from measurable participation to lived experience and meaning. The juxtaposition with El Sistema further highlights the limits of transferability. While the programme offers an inspiring vision of music as a tool for social change, its underlying assumptions cannot be uncritically transplanted into contexts shaped by trauma, instability and institutional regulation. For instance, we mention the initiation of the Big Noise programme in Raploch (Central Scotland) in 2008, which, overseen by Sistema Scotland, aimed to positively impact the lives of the Raploch community members. Borchert (2012) provides a critical perspective on El Sistema by analyzing contemporary subjectivity within the cultural dynamics of institutional discourse.

Residential childcare demands a form of musical engagement that is responsive rather than prescriptive, flexible rather than programmatically fixed, grounded in listening rather than in performance.

These insights raise questions that extend beyond the scope of the present study. Under what conditions does music become a space of safety rather than exposure? When does collective music-making support belonging, and when does it reinforce difference? How might educators recognise moments of silence not as failure, but as meaningful forms of participation? And how can inclusive music education be sustained in environments where continuity itself is fragile? The findings suggest that the deepest contribution of music to inclusion lies less in what is produced than in what is made possible: presence, resonance and the tentative reconstitution of agency. In contexts where life has been defined by rupture, even a brief moment of shared sound may offer a rare experience of coherence. It is within these moments, often unnoticed by conventional evaluation, that the transformative potential of inclusive music education quietly resides.

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INCLUSION OF SENIORS AGED 75+ BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THEIR ENGAGEMENT IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY¹

Inklúzia seniorov nad 75 rokov: Prekážky a príležitosti na ich zapojenie do súčasnej spoločnosti

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Abstract: Population ageing is associated with increasing challenges related to social participation in later life. Older adults may perceive various barriers that limit their engagement in social and community activities, particularly in relation to digital technologies. The aim of this study was to examine perceived social barriers among older adults, with a focus on gender differences and the role of perceived technology barriers. Data were collected through a questionnaire survey and analyzed using independent samples t-tests. The findings show that seniors who perceive technology as a barrier report significantly higher overall barrier scores, whereas no significant gender differences were identified. These results highlight the importance of digital confidence in supporting social participation among older adults.

Keywords: active ageing, barriers to inclusion, community participation, digital inclusion, intergenerational relations, older adults, seniors 75+, social inclusion, social support.

Abstrakt: Starnutie obyvateľstva je spojené s rastúcimi výzvami týkajúcimi sa sociálnej participácie v neskoršom veku. Starší dospelí môžu vnímať rôzne prekážky, ktoré obmedzujú ich zapájanie sa do sociálnych a komunitných aktivít, najmä v súvislosti s digitálnymi technológiami. Cieľom tejto štúdie bolo preskúmať vnímané sociálne prekážky medzi staršími dospelými so zameraním na rodové rozdiely a úlohu vnímaných technologických prekážok. Údaje boli zbierané prostredníctvom dotazníkového prieskumu a analyzované pomocou t-testov nezávislých vzoriek. Zistenia ukazujú, že seniori, ktorí vnímajú technológiu ako prekážku, uvádzajú výrazne vyššie celkové skóre prekážok, pričom neboli zistené žiadne významné rodové rozdiely. Tieto výsledky zdôrazňujú dôležitosť digitálnej dôvery pri podpore sociálnej participácie starších dospelých.

Kľúčové slová: aktívne starnutie, prekážky začlenenia, účasť komunity, digitálne začlenenie, medzigeneračné vzťahy, starší dospelí, seniori nad 75 rokov, sociálne začlenenie; sociálna podpora.

Introduction

Population ageing presents growing challenges related to social participation and inclusion in later life. Older adults may experience various social and psychological barriers that limit their engagement in everyday activities. In recent years, digital technologies have become an important factor influencing

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social participation; however, for some seniors, technology is perceived as a barrier rather than a resource. Such perceptions may contribute to broader experiences of social exclusion. Previous research indicates that perceived barriers are shaped by individual and social characteristics, including gender and digital confidence. Understanding how these factors influence perceived barriers is essential for developing effective interventions aimed at promoting active ageing. The aim of this study is to examine perceived social barriers among older adults, with a specific focus on gender differences and the role of perceived technology barriers.

The research question guiding this study is: *Do perceived social barriers differ according to gender and whether technology is perceived as a barrier?*

Theoretical foundations

The inclusion of seniors aged 75 and above is becoming an increasingly urgent topic in contemporary society, closely linked to rising life expectancy and the growing proportion of older adults in the population (World Health Organization, 2020). Population ageing creates new social, health, and economic challenges that require comprehensive approaches to supporting the engagement of older individuals in community and public life (Phillipson, 2013). Seniors aged 75+ often face cumulative forms of disadvantage, such as declining health, limited mobility, and social isolation, all of which can significantly restrict their participation (Walker, 2019). Inclusive policy therefore emphasizes the need to create conditions that promote active ageing, equal opportunities, and accessible services (European Commission, 2018). A crucial prerequisite for inclusion is the removal of barriers that prevent older adults from fully participating in social interactions and decision-making processes (Kalache & Kickbusch, 1997). Attention is also given to the prevention of ageism, which fundamentally influences how older people are perceived and positioned within society (Butler, 1975). The inclusion of seniors aged 75+ requires interdisciplinary cooperation among social services, healthcare systems, community organisations, and family networks (OECD, 2021). An essential component of this issue is the strengthening of digitalisation and the development of digital literacy, both of which can significantly contribute to reducing social isolation (Seifert, Cotten & Xie, 2020). Current research shows that older adults can become active agents of community life when accessible and meaningful forms of engagement are made available to them (Buffel & Phillipson, 2016). The outcomes of inclusive measures result not only in improved quality of life for seniors but also in a more cohesive and socially responsive society as a whole (WHO, 2015). Demographic Ageing of Older Adults Demographic ageing occurs as a result of changes in patterns of demographic reproduction and is characterised by shifts in the proportion of

children and post-reproductive age groups within the population. This process may be driven by two principal factors. The first is a relative deceleration in the growth of younger age groups, most often caused by a decline in fertility and birth rates. This type of ageing is referred to as "ageing at the base of the age pyramid." The second factor is an acceleration in the growth of older age groups, resulting from a more rapid decline in mortality rates at higher ages. As life expectancy increases, a larger proportion of individuals survive into old and very old age. This process is known as "ageing at the top of the age pyramid." In practice, both types of ageing usually occur simultaneously. According to Müller & Kozáková (2006), *"the populations of Europe and the Czech Republic are characterised by an advanced degree of demographic ageing. The age structure is undergoing significant changes: the proportion of older adults aged 60 or 65+ is increasing, while the proportion of those under 15 is decreasing."* Projections by the Czech Statistical Office indicate that by 2050, the Czech Republic will have half a million people aged 85+ (compared with 101,718 in 2006) and nearly three million people aged 65+. Life expectancy at birth is predicted to reach 78.9 years for men and 84.5 years for women in 2050 (compared with 73.4 and 79.7 years in 2006).

It is anticipated that, between 2000 and 2050, economically developed countries will see a threefold increase in the proportion of people aged 80+, while the number of centenarians may rise more than fifteenfold. According to the most recent demographic projections (Czech Statistical Office, 2012), the number of individuals aged 65+ will continue to grow as larger post-war cohorts reach this age. This trend will intensify during the first half of the 21st century, particularly between 2011 and 2017, due to the ageing of the strong post-war generations. The number of children aged 0–14 is expected to decline steadily until 2010, increase modestly between 2010 and 2015, and then decrease again. From 1,589,766 children in 2002, the number is projected to fall to 1,173,004 by 2050 — a decline of 416,762.

The opposite pattern will occur among individuals aged 65+: from 1,417,962 in 2002, the number will rise to 2,956,079 in 2050 — an increase of 1,538,117 people, effectively more than doubling.

In terms of percentage representation, between 2002 and 2050:

- the share of children aged 0–14 is expected to decrease from 15.6% to 12.4 %,
- while the share of older adults aged 65+ is projected to rise markedly from 13.9 % to 31.3 %.

Demographic ageing therefore represents a profound shift in population structure, with significant implications for social, health, and economic systems.

Specification of the 75+ Age Group

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), ageing can be divided into the following stages:

- 64–74: early old age
- 75–89: advanced old age
- 90+: longevity

More recent scholarly literature (Mühlbacher, 2004) introduces the concepts of the *third age*, referring to a period of relatively independent and active life in older adulthood, and the *fourth age*, characterised by growing dependence on others in meeting basic needs (Veteška, 2017, p. 42).

The period of 75+ is frequently accompanied by changes in functional capacity, increasing medical complexity, and atypical disease trajectories. As Sýkorová (2007, p. 12) notes, “*old age is more than other life stages associated with transformations that may lead to an erosion of personal resources and adversely affect an individual’s ability to maintain self-sufficiency and autonomy in decision-making.*”

Adults aged 75+ exhibit higher prevalence of chronic illnesses, cognitive decline, and greater dependency on social and health services, making them a particularly vulnerable group with respect to social exclusion (OECD, 2021). At the same time, this age cohort faces heightened risks of loneliness, loss of social support, and diminishing social roles — factors that can negatively affect overall quality of life (Dahlberg & McKee, 2014). A defining characteristic of the 75+ population is its heterogeneity. Individuals differ considerably in their levels of functional ability, economic resources, and social capital, which underscores the need for differentiated and individualised interventions (Walker, 2019). In the context of social inclusion, it is therefore essential to consider not only chronological age but also the complex biopsychosocial profile of this group, which fundamentally shapes their opportunities for engagement and participation in society (WHO, 2020).

Inclusion in the 75+ Aged Category

The inclusion of older adults aged 75 and over represents one of the major contemporary challenges in social policy and gerontology. This age group is often referred to as the *older old* or the *fourth age*, as it is characterised by an accumulation of biological, psychological, and social changes that can substantially influence the degree of participation in social life (Baltes & Smith,

2003). Inclusion in this stage of life cannot be reduced merely to the removal of external barriers; it requires a comprehensive approach that integrates health care, social support, access to services, and the strengthening of subjective autonomy (WHO, 2015).

Adults aged 75+ face a higher incidence of health complications, chronic diseases, and functional limitations, which can reduce their opportunities for active engagement in society (OECD, 2021). These factors contribute to an increased risk of social isolation, which occurs in this age category up to twice as often as in younger seniors (Dahlberg & McKee, 2014). Inclusion therefore encompasses not only supporting the physical accessibility of community life but also creating environments in which older adults are able to establish and maintain social relationships that significantly influence their psychological well-being and quality of life.

Digital inclusion plays a similarly important role. The digitalisation of public services, banking, health care, and everyday communication has made digital literacy a key prerequisite for social inclusion (Seifert, Cotten & Xie, 2020). Adults aged 75+ are among those most at risk of digital exclusion. Support in this area—whether through education, accessible technologies, or assistive services—is thus an essential component of inclusive policy.

Equally important is the prevention of ageism. Age-related discrimination and stereotypical views of individuals aged 75+ as passive, dependent, or less valuable have a direct impact on their self-perception and willingness to participate in social activities (Butler, 1975). Reducing ageist attitudes and promoting positive narratives about later life therefore constitute important elements of inclusion efforts.

Given the considerable heterogeneity of this age group, it is necessary to develop differentiated strategies that reflect the health status, socioeconomic resources, life histories, and individual characteristics of each older adult (Walker, 2019). Inclusion in the 75+ age category thus does not rely on universal programmes but rather on respecting diversity, providing individualised interventions, and reinforcing human dignity.

Overall, inclusion of adults aged 75+ is a key prerequisite for social cohesion, active ageing, and the prevention of exclusion in later life (WHO, 2020).

Risk factors for social exclusion among adults aged 75+ are multifaceted and include a combination of health-related, psychosocial, economic, and environmental conditions that become particularly pronounced in this period. Research indicates that with increasing age, the prevalence of chronic illnesses, cognitive decline, mobility limitations, and functional dependence rises, all of which affect the ability of older adults to participate in public life (WHO, 2015).

Reduced physical fitness and declining health constitute major predictors of social isolation and weakened participation.

Another key risk factor is loneliness and the loss of social roles. Individuals aged 75+ are more likely to experience the death of a partner, loss of friends, and weakening of broader social networks, resulting in reduced social support and fewer opportunities for interaction (Dahlberg & McKee, 2014).

Economic disadvantage represents an additional significant factor. Older adults in this age group often have limited financial resources due to lower pension income and high costs of health care or assistive aids. This can restrict access to quality services and activities that promote inclusion (OECD, 2021). Economic insecurity directly affects housing options, mobility, and participation in community programmes.

A specific contemporary risk factor is digital exclusion. As an increasing proportion of public services, health care and communication moves online, older adults who lack digital competencies may lose access to essential information and social engagement (Seifert, Cotten & Xie, 2020). Low digital literacy thus intensifies isolation and complicates social inclusion.

The environment in which older adults live also plays a significant role. A lack of accessible infrastructure, limited transportation options, or the absence of community centres can hinder contact with others and increase dependence on support (Phillipson, 2013). Overburdened care systems further contribute to exclusion, as they often lack the capacity to provide the individualised assistance required to maintain autonomy and participation among adults aged 75+ (WHO, 2020).

Social Significance of Older Adults' Participation in Society

The participation of older adults in society represents a key component of a cohesive, inclusive, and intergenerationally balanced social structure. Active engagement of seniors within the community contributes not only to their personal well-being but also to the quality of the social environment as a whole. According to the concept of active ageing defined by the World Health Organization, participation is one of the three fundamental pillars of healthy and dignified ageing (WHO, 2015). Thus, the involvement of older adults is not merely an individual benefit but a social value that strengthens community cohesion, participatory democracy, and intergenerational solidarity.

One of the most important aspects of this social contribution is the enhancement of social capital. Older adults possess extensive life experience, knowledge, and skills that are relevant to the wider community and can be applied through volunteering, civic initiatives, or community activities (Buffel & Phillipson, 2016). Research confirms that active participation of seniors supports

intergenerational learning, the transmission of cultural values, and the stability of social bonds (Villé et al., 2012). Socially active seniors are less threatened by loneliness and depression, while simultaneously contributing to an improved social climate within communities.

The engagement of older adults also carries significant economic value. Older volunteers constitute an important workforce in the non-profit sector, educational projects, and caregiving services, thereby complementing formal support systems in a meaningful way (OECD, 2021). Family care provided by seniors—for instance, support with grandchildren or assistance to adult children—represents a substantial economic contribution that often remains invisible in traditional economic indicators (Harper, 2014). Social participation therefore contributes to the sustainability of social systems and reduces pressure on institutional care.

The significance of senior participation also lies in strengthening their autonomy and subjective quality of life. Engagement in meaningful activities enables older adults to maintain identity, a sense of competence, usefulness, and purpose—all of which play a crucial role in mental well-being (Walker, 2019). Active social involvement helps prevent the risks of social exclusion, which are significantly higher in later life, especially in the context of reduced mobility, declining health, or loss of social roles (Dahlberg & McKee, 2014).

Specific Needs of Older Adults Aged 75+

Older adults aged 75 and over represent a demographic group characterised by specific patterns of ageing and needs that differ significantly from those of younger senior cohorts. This stage of life is often referred to as *advanced old age* or the *fourth age*, as it is marked by a higher prevalence of chronic illnesses, a decline in physical capacity, and greater functional dependency (Baltes & Smith, 2003). In the 75+ age group, mobility limitations, deterioration of sensory functions, and increased demand for medical care, rehabilitation, and assistive services are common (WHO, 2015). These health-related characteristics call for a comprehensive and coordinated support system that integrates prevention, rehabilitation, and long-term care.

Alongside physical changes, psychosocial needs play a significant role. In this age category, the risk of loneliness, social isolation, and the loss of close relationships increases, which may negatively affect mental health and overall quality of life (Dahlberg & McKee, 2014). Maintaining psychological well-being requires access to social contacts, regular communication with family or the community, and opportunities for engagement in meaningful activities that reinforce a sense of usefulness and identity.

Economic factors also represent an important dimension. Adults aged 75+ often live with limited financial resources, which may restrict access to quality services, adequate housing, and health care (OECD, 2021). A key characteristic of this age group is its considerable heterogeneity. Within the 75+ population, we find both highly functional and active older adults as well as those requiring extensive support. This highlights the need for individualised services, flexible models of care, and approaches that respect diverse life situations, preferences, and values.

Overall, the needs of older adults aged 75+ are complex and encompass health, social, psychological, and economic dimensions that must be addressed in a coordinated manner within care systems and social policy.

Health Characteristics of Adults Aged 75+

The health status of older adults aged 75+ is characterised by considerable variability; however, in this age group, risk factors associated with physical, cognitive, and sensory decline tend to accumulate. With increasing age, the prevalence of chronic conditions such as cardiovascular diseases, diabetes mellitus, osteoarthritis, osteoporosis, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease rises (WHO, 2015). Multimorbidities—the co-occurrence of two or more chronic illnesses—are also common and significantly affect independence and the need for coordinated health and social care (Marengoni et al., 2011).

Declining physical capacity is further exacerbated by sarcopenia, loss of muscle mass, and reduced balance, which increase the risk of falls, one of the leading health concerns among adults aged 75+. Sensory decline—including impaired vision and hearing—becomes more common and can reduce autonomy, orientation, and safety in daily activities (OECD, 2021). Cognitive changes may include slower psychomotor speed, impaired memory, and decreased attention; more severe cognitive deficits and dementia occur with rising prevalence in this age category (Prince et al., 2015). Mental health is frequently affected by a combination of biological factors and psychosocial losses, which can lead to depressive symptoms, anxiety, and heightened feelings of loneliness.

Health characteristics in the 75+ age group are closely linked to functional independence. In this stage of life, the need for long-term care, rehabilitation, and assistive technologies increases, as the ability to manage activities of daily living (ADL) and more complex instrumental activities of daily living (IADL) declines. Functional independence is a key predictor of long-term care needs and has a major influence on quality of life and the ability to remain in one's home environment (WHO, 2020). Support for independence requires rehabilitation, occupational and physiotherapy, and the use of assistive technologies that can delay or reduce the progression of dependency.

Physical and Somatic Changes

Physical health in adults aged 75+ is characterised by a reduction in muscle mass (sarcopenia), decreased strength, and impaired balance, all of which heighten the risk of falls—one of the most frequent causes of hospitalisation and loss of independence in this age group (WHO, 2015). Changes within the cardiovascular system—such as arterial stiffness, hypertension, and heart failure—are common. High prevalence of chronic illnesses, including type 2 diabetes, osteoarthritis, osteoporosis, and COPD, increases the need for medical care and comprehensive monitoring of health status (OECD, 2021).

Sensory functions often decline significantly after age 75. In terms of vision, macular degeneration, glaucoma, and cataracts are frequent; in hearing, sensorineural hearing loss is common. These impairments significantly impact safety, orientation, social communication, and overall quality of life. Sensory loss also elevates the risk of isolation, depressive symptoms, and dependency.

Cognitive and Psychological Health

Cognitive changes in adults aged 75+ may include slower processing speed, diminished short-term memory, and impairments in executive functions. Although mild cognitive decline is common, the risk of dementia rises considerably, with prevalence in this age group reaching 20–25% (Prince et al., 2015). Cognitive impairments significantly affect functional independence and may necessitate assistance or long-term care.

Psychological health is equally important. Depression, anxiety, and chronic stress are frequently influenced by physical limitations, loss of social roles, bereavement, or reduced social interactions (Dahlberg & McKee, 2014). Loneliness is widely recognised as a key risk factor for adverse physical and mental outcomes in later life.

Functional Independence and Long-Term Care

Ageing in the 75+ group is strongly associated with declining ability to perform activities of daily living (ADL) and more complex instrumental activities (IADL), such as shopping, cooking, financial management, or medication use. Functional independence is a major determinant of long-term care needs and strongly influences quality of life and the ability to remain at home (WHO, 2020). Supporting independence involves rehabilitation, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, and the use of assistive technologies.

Health Determinants and the Role of the Environment

The environment in which adults aged 75+ live plays a crucial role in health outcomes. Accessibility, availability of health and social services, preventive care,

and adequate nutrition are essential factors capable of mitigating the effects of biological ageing. Older adults who live in supportive, safe, and socially active environments show better physical and psychological outcomes than those living in isolation or without adequate support (OECD, 2021)

Barriers to Social Inclusion

Barriers to social inclusion represent factors that prevent individuals or groups from fully participating in the social, economic, cultural, and political life of society. These barriers are multi-layered, encompassing individual, structural, institutional, and cultural dimensions, and they often accumulate. As a result, they threaten equal opportunities, social cohesion, and the ability of society to ensure fair conditions for all (Levitas et al., 2007).

1. Economic Barriers

One of the most significant obstacles to social inclusion is economic inequality. Low income, poverty, unemployment, and inadequate access to housing can severely limit opportunities for social participation. Economic exclusion often leads to restricted access to education, health care, social services, and technology (OECD, 2019), thereby reinforcing further inequalities and reducing overall participation.

2. Social and Community Barriers

Social isolation, lack of support networks, and limited opportunities for community involvement are among the most common barriers to inclusion. Individuals without social support are more vulnerable to loneliness, marginalisation, and psychological difficulties, which further reduce their ability to engage actively (Dahlberg & McKee, 2014). Social barriers may also be strengthened by territorial segregation, for instance in socially excluded neighbourhoods.

3. Institutional Barriers

Institutional barriers arise from insufficiently inclusive policies, rigid rules, or administrative complexity. They also include limited availability of social and health services, missing interdisciplinary collaboration, or financial barriers that prevent individuals from using support programmes (Burchardt, Le Grand & Piachaud, 2002). Institutional barriers have long-term effects because they create structural inequalities and impede access to participation.

4. Cultural and Value-Based Barriers

Cultural barriers include discrimination, stereotypes, stigmatisation, and prejudice. These barriers particularly affect groups vulnerable due to age, disability, ethnicity, gender, or social status. Ageism, racism, and xenophobia reduce acceptance and recognition, leading to lower participation and a sense of

exclusion (Silver, 2015). Cultural barriers are deeply rooted and difficult to change without long-term societal strategies.

5. Digital Barriers

In contemporary society, digital skills are essential. Limited access to digital technologies, the internet, or insufficient digital literacy presents a major barrier to inclusion, particularly for older adults, socially disadvantaged groups, and individuals with disabilities (Seifert, Cotten & Xie, 2020). Digital exclusion restricts access to information, services, and social engagement.

Individual Barriers

Mobility in older age is one of the most critical indicators of functional health, independence, and overall quality of life. In the 75+ age group, mobility becomes a central factor influencing the ability of older adults to remain active, engaged, and independent in everyday activities. Changes in mobility during this period result from a complex interaction of biological, psychological, social, and environmental factors that influence each other and can accumulate over time (WHO, 2015).

Biological Factors of Mobility

Ageing is naturally associated with physiological changes that affect mobility. Among the most significant is the loss of muscle mass—sarcopenia—which may begin around age 60 but becomes more pronounced after age 75. It is accompanied by reduced muscle strength, impaired coordination, and decreased stability, leading to slower gait, shorter step length, and increased uncertainty in movement. Joint changes such as osteoarthritis or osteoporosis may cause pain, reduced range of motion, and increased fatigue during walking.

Multimorbidity — the co-occurrence of two or more chronic diseases — is also common in this age group and can further limit mobility. Cardiovascular diseases, diabetes mellitus, neurological disorders, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease increase the risk of limited mobility and loss of independence (Marengoni et al., 2011).

Psychological and Cognitive Determinants of Mobility

Mobility is not only a physical ability but also a psychological process. Fear of falling represents one of the key psychological barriers and may lead individuals to restrict their movement even when not objectively necessary. In adults aged 75+, this fear is often heightened due to previous falls or impaired balance (Davis et al., 2011). Cognitive functions — particularly attention, executive function, and spatial orientation — are essential for safe mobility. Mild cognitive impairment or

early-stage dementia can affect the ability to respond to obstacles, assess risks, and plan movement.

Social Dimensions of Mobility

Mobility also has a significant social dimension. An older adult who can safely move outside the home has greater opportunities to maintain social contacts, participate in community activities, and engage in public life. Conversely, limited mobility often leads to isolation, loneliness, and reduced psychological well-being, which further decreases motivation to remain active. Mobility is therefore not only a health matter but a central component of social inclusion.

Environmental Factors

The environment in which an older adult lives has a crucial impact on mobility. Environmental barriers such as uneven pavements, high curbs, lack of handrails, poor lighting, or poorly designed housing can restrict movement and increase the risk of falls. Outdoor mobility is influenced by transport infrastructure, public transportation availability, and the presence of safe, accessible pathways (OECD, 2021). A well-adapted environment can support mobility even in cases of significant functional limitations—for example, through walkers, ramps, grab bars, or lifts.

Falls as a Key Mobility Issue

Falls represent one of the most significant health problems among older adults. In individuals aged 75+, falls occur more frequently and have more severe consequences—including fractures, hospitalisation, long-term immobility, and sometimes permanent loss of independence. Falls also have psychological consequences: they often trigger a “vicious circle” of fear of movement, leading to reduced activity, further muscle weakening, and even greater fall risk. Effective fall prevention involves physiotherapy, balance training, environmental modifications, and education for both the senior and the family.

Supporting Mobility

Supporting mobility in adults aged 75+ requires an interdisciplinary approach. Physiotherapy, rehabilitation, regular physical activity, and exercises aimed at strengthening muscles, balance, and flexibility are essential. Equally important are assistive devices—canes, walkers, or wheelchairs—which help maintain independence and safety. Support must also include education focused on fall prevention and motivation for daily movement.

Health Limitations in Older Age (75+)

Health limitations in older age represent a complex set of physical, cognitive, sensory, and psychological constraints that can affect independence, quality of life, and opportunities for social participation. In the 75+ age group, these limitations often accumulate, interact, and may become progressive, making this population particularly vulnerable. Health limitations are not only the result of biological ageing but also reflect lifelong health factors, lifestyle, socioeconomic conditions, and access to health care.

Physical Limitations

Physical limitations are most often associated with muscle loss (sarcopenia), reduced lower-limb strength, decreased range of motion, and impaired balance. These factors lead to slower walking, higher fatigue, and reduced ability to manage daily activities. Chronic musculoskeletal conditions such as osteoarthritis or osteoporosis can cause pain and increase the risk of falls and fractures. Impaired cardiovascular or respiratory function may manifest as breathlessness, reduced exercise tolerance, and diminished circulatory capacity, further reducing physical activity.

Cognitive Limitations

Cognitive changes in adults aged 75+ commonly include slowed psychomotor speed, weakened short-term memory, reduced attention, and difficulties with planning or organisation. These limitations can significantly affect independent functioning, orientation in unfamiliar environments, and the ability to manage unexpected situations. Mild cognitive impairment (MCI) increases the risk of dementia, and some individuals already show symptoms of neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's disease or vascular dementia.

Methodology

Sample

The study included 51 older adults aged 75–85 years ($M = 77.5$; $SD = 3.2$). Women predominated ($n = 46$), with 5 male participants.

Living arrangements were categorized as:

- A – living alone (n = 25)
- B – living with a partner (n = 4)
- C – living with family (n = 11)
- D – residential care (n = 11; excluded from A–C comparison)

For some analyses, age was dichotomized into:

- <80 years
- 80+ years

Instrument – Barriers Questionnaire

The questionnaire contained demographic items and 12 barrier-related items (Q4–Q15) measuring:

- perceived social inclusion (Q4)
- participation in community activities (Q5)
- perceived societal respect (Q6)
- frequency of contact with family/friends (Q7)
- subjective loneliness (Q8)
- involvement in intergenerational activities (Q9)
- availability of social services (Q10)
- availability of health services (Q11)
- awareness of senior services (Q12)
- mobile phone use (Q13)
- internet use (Q14)
- perceived technology barriers (Q15)

All items were scored so that higher scores = stronger perceived barriers:

- favorable response → 0 points
- mildly unfavorable → 1 point
- moderately unfavorable → 2 points
- strongly unfavorable → 3 points

A total Barrier Score was computed as the sum of Q4–Q15 (range 0–36).

Statistical Analyses

The following analyses were conducted:

- Mean and standard deviation (SD) of total barrier scores
- Two-sample t-tests comparing:
 - women vs. men
 - living arrangement groups (A, B, C)
 - age groups (<80 vs. 80+)
 - loneliness levels
 - internet-use groups
 - perceived technology barrier groups

- perceived social inclusion groups

The significance threshold was $\alpha = 0.05$.

Results

Overall barrier score

- Mean = 18.0
- SD = 2.02

The sample reports a moderate level of barriers, with relatively low variability.

Gender differences

- Women: M = 17.9
- Men: M = 18.6

$t = -0.68, p = 0.53 \rightarrow$ Not significant

Men and women report similar levels of barriers.

Living arrangement (A, B, C)

Group	Description	Mean Barrier Score
A	living alone	17.5
B	living with partner	18.8
C	living with family	18.8

T-tests:

- A vs B $\rightarrow t = -1.07, p = 0.35$
- A vs C $\rightarrow t = -1.80, p = 0.088$ (trend only)
- B vs C $\rightarrow t = 0.02, p = 0.99$

No significant differences, but group A tends to report slightly fewer barriers.

(Graph “Average Barrier Score by Living Arrangement” will be generated upon request.)

Age groups (<80 vs 80+)

- <80 years: M = 17.76
- 80+ years: M = 18.50

$t = -1.13, p = 0.27 \rightarrow$ Not significant

Older seniors show slightly higher barrier scores, but the difference is not statistically meaningful.

Loneliness (Q8)

Groups

- Low loneliness (0–1)
- Higher loneliness (2–3)

Scores

- Low: $M = 16.86$
- High: $M = 18.83$

$t = -3.93, p < 0.001 \rightarrow$ Highly significant

Loneliness is a strong predictor of higher barrier scores.

Internet use (Q14)

- Uses internet: $M = 17.88$
- Does not / only with assistance: $M = 18.12$

$t = -0.42, p = 0.68 \rightarrow$ Not significant

Internet use alone does not strongly differentiate barrier scores.

Perceived technology barriers (Q15)

- Tech not a barrier: $M = 17.05$
- Tech is a barrier: $M = 18.63$

$t = -2.82, p = 0.008 \rightarrow$ Significant

Those who perceive technology as a barrier report substantially higher barriers overall.

Perceived social inclusion (Q4)

- Feels included: $M = 17.88$
- Does not feel included: $M = 18.12$

$t = -0.42, p = 0.68 \rightarrow$ Not significant

Results

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to examine differences in perceived social barriers according to gender and perceived technology barriers. The analysis revealed no statistically significant differences between women and men in overall barrier scores. In contrast, a statistically significant difference was found between participants who perceive technology as a barrier and those who do not, with higher barrier scores reported by seniors who identified technology as a barrier. These findings indicate that perceived technology barriers play a more prominent role in shaping social barriers than gender.

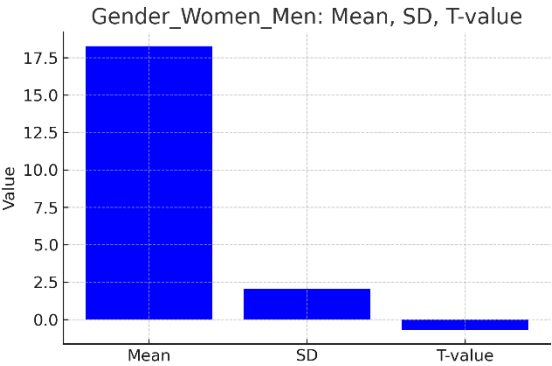
Table 1 Statistical analysis of selected perceived barriers (gender and technology)

Comparison	Group	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	t	df	Sig. level	p	Estimate
Gender	Women	45	17.93	2.03	-0.68	4.89	$\alpha=0.05$	0.525	ns
	Men	5	18.60	2.07					
Technology	No barrier	20	17.05	2.06	-2.82	36.16	$\alpha=0.05$	0.008	sig
	Barrier	30	18.63	1.75					

(Source: own compilation)

Legend:
N = number of participants; Mean = arithmetic mean; Std. Dev. = standard deviation; t = t-value; df = degrees of freedom; p = p-value

Figure 1 Mean, SD and T-value for Gender Comparison (Women vs. Men)



(Source: own compilation)

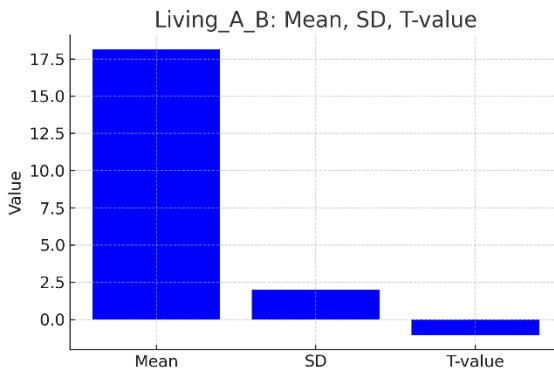
Caption

Figure 1 presents the comparison of barrier levels between women and men. The chart displays the average barrier score (Mean), the standard deviation (SD), and the t-value resulting from the t-test comparing the two groups.

Commentary

Women and men demonstrate very similar levels of perceived social barriers. The t-value does not reach statistical significance, indicating that gender is not a meaningful predictor in this dataset. Both groups show comparable variability, suggesting that barriers affect seniors similarly regardless of gender.

Figure 2 Mean, SD and T-value for Living Arrangement: Living Alone vs. With Partner (A vs. B)



(Source: own compilation)

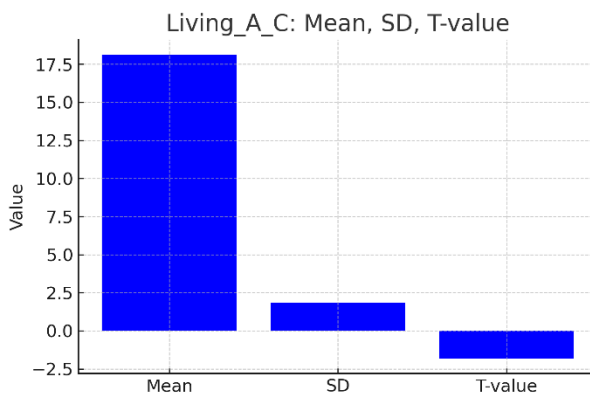
Caption

Figure 2 illustrates the comparison of seniors living alone (A) and those living with a partner (B). The graph reports the mean barrier score, standard deviation, and t-test value.

Commentary

Although seniors living alone show slightly lower barrier scores than those living with a partner, the t-value indicates that the difference is not statistically significant. The findings suggest that living arrangement alone does not determine perceived barriers, and individual differences may play a larger role.

Figure 3 Mean, SD and T-value for Living Arrangement: Living Alone vs. With Family (A vs. C)



(Source: own compilation)

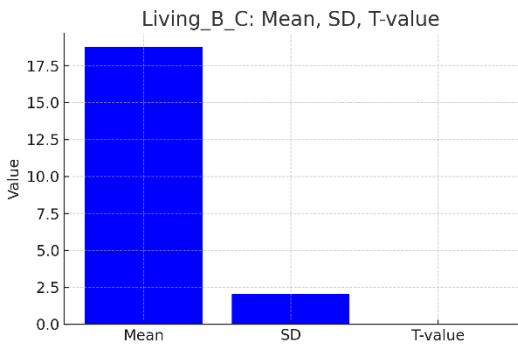
Caption

This figure compares individuals living alone (A) with those living with family members (C), reporting Mean, SD, and T-value.

Commentary

Seniors living with family exhibit marginally higher barrier scores compared to those living alone. Although not statistically significant, the direction of the effect may indicate greater dependence or reduced autonomy. Further research with a larger sample is warranted.

Figure 4 Mean, SD and T-value for Living Arrangement: With Partner vs. With Family (B vs. C)



(Source: own compilation)

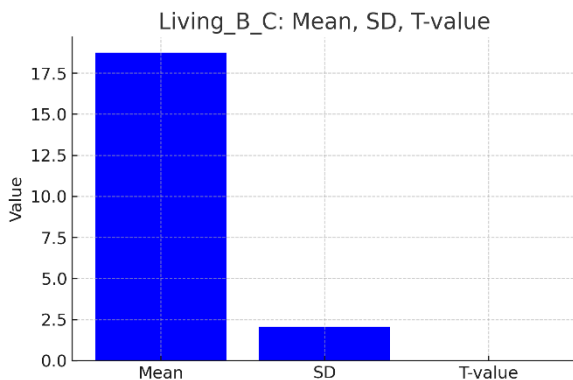
Caption

Figure 4 shows a comparison between living with a partner (B) and living with family (C).

Commentary

Both groups report nearly identical mean barrier scores, resulting in a t-value extremely close to zero. This suggests no observable difference between these living situations in terms of perceived barriers.

Figure 5 Mean, SD and T-value for Age Groups (<80 vs. 80+)



(Source: own compilation)

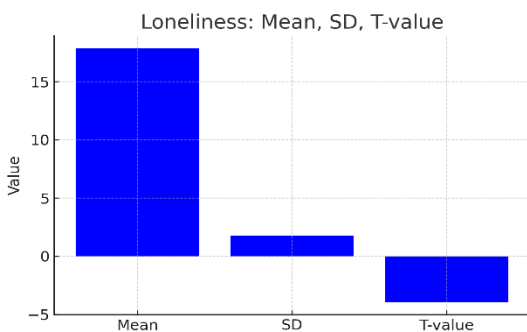
Caption

The figure displays differences in barrier scores between participants aged below 80 and those aged 80 and older.

Commentary

Although older adults (80+) have slightly higher mean barrier scores, the t-value indicates that this difference is not statistically significant. Age therefore does not appear to be a strong determinant of perceived barriers within this sample.

Figure 6 Mean, SD and T-value for Loneliness Groups (Low vs. Higher Loneliness)



(Source: own compilation)

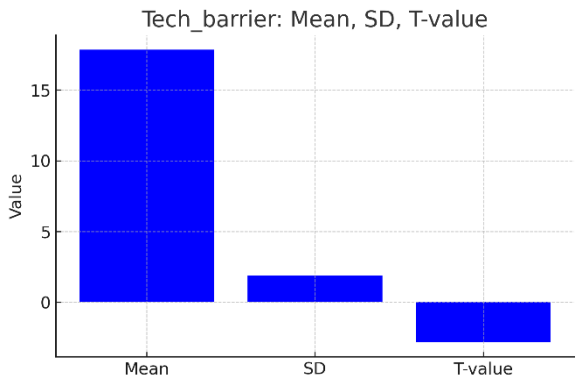
Caption

Figure 6 compares seniors with low loneliness to those experiencing higher loneliness levels.

Commentary

This comparison reveals one of the strongest effects in the study. Seniors with higher loneliness levels report notably higher barrier scores, and the t-value is statistically significant. Loneliness is therefore a key factor contributing to increased social barriers, and interventions should prioritize addressing social isolation.

Figure 7 Mean, SD and T-value for Internet Use (Uses Internet vs. No/With Assistance)



(Source: own compilation)

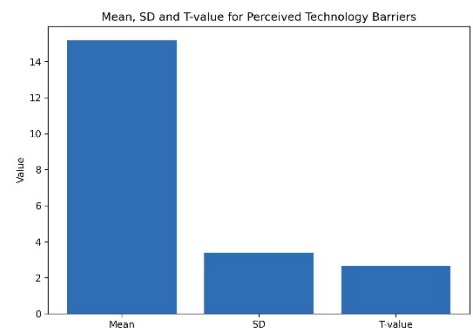
Caption

Figure 7 illustrates the differences in barrier scores between seniors who use the internet independently and those who do not or require help.

Commentary

Despite minor differences in mean scores, the t-value shows no significant difference between groups. Internet use by itself does not substantially influence overall barriers. Digital literacy may play a role, but further measures would be needed to clarify this.

Figure 8 Mean, SD and T-value for Perceived Technology Barriers (Technology Not a Barrier vs. Technology Is a Barrier)



(Source: own compilation)

Caption

Figure 8 compares seniors who do not perceive technology as a barrier with those who perceive technology as a barrier. The chart presents the mean barrier score, standard deviation, and the t-value resulting from the comparison of the two groups.

Commentary

This figure shows a clear and statistically significant difference. Participants who view technology as a barrier report considerably higher overall barrier scores. This finding suggests that digital confidence plays an important role in social participation and highlights the need to address technological barriers in programs aimed at supporting older adults.

Discussion

This study examined perceived social barriers among older adults, with a particular focus on technology-related barriers and their association with social participation. The findings indicate that seniors who perceive technology as a barrier report significantly higher overall barrier scores than those who do not. This result underscores the importance of digital confidence as a key component of social inclusion in later life.

Previous research has shown that digital exclusion can exacerbate social isolation among older adults by limiting access to information, communication, and essential services (van Deursen & Helsper, 2015; Seifert, Cotten, & Xie, 2021). The present findings support this perspective by demonstrating that perceived technological barriers extend beyond technical difficulties and reflect broader challenges related to autonomy and participation. Importantly, it is the subjective perception of technology—rather than its mere availability—that appears to shape seniors' experiences of social barriers.

In line with models of active and successful aging, social engagement and perceived inclusion emerged as protective factors against higher barrier scores (Rowe & Kahn, 1997; World Health Organization, 2015). Seniors who reported stronger social integration or more frequent interpersonal contact tended to experience fewer perceived barriers, highlighting the ongoing relevance of social relationships in maintaining well-being in older age.

From a practical perspective, these findings emphasize the need for interventions that combine social support with digital inclusion strategies. Programs aimed at older adults should focus not only on improving access to technology but also on building confidence, reducing anxiety, and providing age-appropriate digital education (Seifert & Cotten, 2020). Such approaches may contribute to lowering perceived barriers and enhancing quality of life.

Several limitations should be acknowledged, including the relatively small sample size and its gender imbalance, which may limit generalizability. Additionally, the cross-sectional design precludes causal interpretation. Future research should employ longitudinal designs and larger samples to further investigate the role of digital competence in social participation among seniors.

In conclusion, the study highlights perceived technology barriers as a significant factor influencing social inclusion in older adulthood. Addressing digital confidence alongside social and community-based support appears essential for reducing barriers and promoting active aging.

Conclusion

- Barrier levels in the sample are moderate and relatively consistent.
- No significant differences were found across gender, age, or living arrangements, although individuals living alone tend to report fewer barriers.
- Loneliness and perceived technology barriers emerged as key factors strongly associated with higher barrier scores.
- Internet use itself is not a significant determinant.
- Perceived social inclusion did not significantly affect total barrier scores.

These findings highlight the importance of psychosocial factors—especially loneliness and digital confidence—as targets for interventions aimed at improving social participation among older adults.

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THE VULNERABLE BEHIND BARS IN THE CONTEXT OF INCLUSION AND PROTECTION OF HUMAN DIGNITY IN THE CZECH PRISON SYSTEM¹

Zraniteľní za mrežami v kontexte inklúzie a ochrany ľudskej dôstojnosti v českom väzenskom systéme

František Vlach²

Abstract: The paper examines the topic of inclusion in the context of imprisonment in the Czech Republic, focusing particularly on vulnerable groups of inmates and the protection of human dignity. In the theoretical part, it links the concept of human rights, restorative justice approaches, and international standards for the treatment of inmates with the practical functioning of the Czech Prison Service. Using official statistics and previous research, it outlines recent trends in the composition of the prison population, including the above-average share of women incarcerated in Czech prisons and the specific risks and needs associated with female imprisonment. Special attention is given to education as an inclusive tool, drawing on both international evidence regarding the effects of prison education on recidivism and on the current system of formal and non-formal education in Czech prisons. Furthermore, the paper analyses the situation of vulnerable groups and the role of gender-sensitive approaches, as well as institutional barriers to inclusion, such as capacity limits, security-centred regimes, and the substantial psychosocial burden on prison staff. The section addressing staff mental health highlights how long-term stress and emotional strain can undermine employees' ability to work sensitively with vulnerable inmates. In conclusion, the paper offers recommendations for enhancing inclusion in Czech prisons. These include better targeting of programmes, systematic support for education, integrated care for staff mental health, and the development of an institutional culture that consistently respects human rights.

Keywords: inclusion, prison system, prison education, vulnerable groups, women prisoners.

Abstrakt: Príspevok sa zaoberá témou inklúzie v kontexte výkonu trestu odňatia slobody v Českej republike, so zameraním najmä na zraniteľné skupiny väzňov a ochranu ľudskej dôstojnosti. V teoretickej časti spája pojem ľudských práv, prístupy restoratívnej justície a medzinárodné štandardy zaobchádzania s väzňami s praktickým fungovaním Českej väzenskej služby. Na základe oficiálnych štatistík a predchádzajúceho výskumu opisuje najnovšie trendy v zložení väzenskej populácie, vrátane nadpriemerného podielu žien vo väzenských zariadeniach v Českej republike a špecifických rizík a potrieb spojených s väzením žien. Osobitná pozornosť sa venuje vzdelávaniu ako inkluzívnemu nástroju, pričom sa čerpá z medzinárodných dôkazov týkajúcich sa vplyvu vzdelávania vo väzniciach na recidívu a zo súčasného systému formálneho a neformálneho vzdelávania v českých väzniciach. Okrem toho sa v dokumente analyzuje situácia zraniteľných skupín a úloha prístupov zohľadňujúcich rodové hľadisko, ako aj inštitucionálne prekážky inklúzie, ako sú kapacitné obmedzenia, režimy zamerané na bezpečnosť a podstatná psychosociálna záťaž väzenského personálu. Časť venovaná duševnému zdraviu zamestnancov poukazuje na to, ako dlhodobý stres a emocionálne napätie môžu oslabiť schopnosť zamestnancov citlivo pracovať so zraniteľnými väzňami. Na záver príspevok ponúka odporúčania na posilnenie inklúzie v českých väzniciach. Patríl k nim lepšie zameranie programov, systematická podpora vzdelávania, integrovaná starostlivosť o duševné zdravie zamestnancov a rozvoj inštitucionálnej kultúry, ktorá dôsledne rešpektuje ľudské práva.

KLúčové slová: inklúzia, väzenský systém, vzdelávanie vo väzniciach, zraniteľné skupiny, väzenkyne.

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Introduction

The Prison Service of the Czech Republic, in terms of expertise and management complexity, is one of the most demanding state protective bodies due to its role as a public social service. Experts in the prison service work directly with inmates to provide education. While these inmates may pose a danger to society due to their involvement in serious crimes, they also require effective assistance, penitentiary education, and therapy, particularly concerning their personality disorders. This dual role of punishment serves two purposes: first, to punish criminals and protect society from dangerous perpetrators, i.e. individuals with behavioural disorders who threaten the lives, health, and property of citizens; and second, to provide suitable rehabilitation programmes that enhance the chances of successful reintegration of the sentenced into society after release, thereby minimizing the risk of recidivism.

In recent years, the Prison Service of the Czech Republic has undergone significant changes, especially in response to challenges connected with prison overcrowding and the necessity to improve the resocialization programmes for prisoners because of the high rates of penological recidivism. This paper provides an overview of the growth of the prison population, the difference between alleged offenders and those serving sentences, and the economic costs associated with operating the prison system in the Czech Republic over the past decade. These developments are part of a broader European trend that examines the development of prison populations not only in terms of quantity but also in demographics, including gender composition.

Concurrently, there is increasing pressure to ensure that serving a sentence is not solely viewed as a restriction of personal freedom but also as a place where fundamental human rights and individual needs are respected to the greatest extent possible. In this respect, the concept of inclusion within the prison system entails creating conditions in resocialization facilities that consider the diversity of inmates, their health condition, gender, age, social background, and level of vulnerability. The purpose is not to undermine the punitive aspect of punishment, but to enrich it with a restorative and supportive approach that facilitates the future return of convicts to society.

The paper emphasises how the Czech prison system addresses the needs of vulnerable groups of inmates and explores what possibilities an inclusive approach to serving a sentence brings. The analysis particularly focuses on whether these inmates are actually integrated in the processes of support and resocialization or whether they remain marginalized under the existing conditions of imprisonment. Additionally, it identifies factors that either promote or hinder inclusive approaches and suggests potential directions for future prison policies and practices.

Inclusion, human rights, and prison service

The concept of inclusion has traditionally been associated primarily with education, employment, or social policy. However, in recent years, it has also been increasingly applied in relation to imprisonment. In the European context, this emphasis on inclusion is highlighted in documents from the Council of Europe, the UN Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, and the monitoring activities of the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT). Inclusion in prisons does not imply a “softening” of punishments; rather, it entails the consistent application of human dignity, non-discrimination, and equal access to basic services, including healthcare, education, employment, and spiritual and social support (European Prison Rules, European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, European Convention for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, known as the Mandela Rules, UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment).

From a penological perspective, inclusion can be understood as a cross-cutting principle that permeates various aspects of treatment programmes. An inclusive environment is one that identifies the specific needs of different groups of convicts (e.g. women, foreigners, people with mental illness, people with disabilities, and older prisoners) and tailors interventions to address those needs. To the contrary, an environment that treats all inmates as a homogeneous group and applies a uniform, purely “security” regime is not considered inclusive. Such an approach significantly increases the risk of recidivism and secondary victimisation. In the Czech context, this issue is particularly relevant to the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms, Act No. 169/1999 Sb., on the Execution of Imprisonment, Act No. 293/1993 Sb., on the Execution of Custody, and Act No. 555/1992 Sb., on the Prison Service and Court Security.

In the Czech environment, the inclusive approach has so far been reflected in partial projects and internal methodological materials rather than being systematically integrated into basic internal regulations. Nonetheless, there are already examples of good practices, such as specialised wards for mothers with children, targeted programmes for individuals with addictions, and pilot projects focusing on mental health. However, these initiatives address only part of the overall needs and face limitations related to capacity, funding, and staffing. These issues are often outlined in conceptual documents and internal standards of the Prison Service of the Czech Republic, as well as methodological instructions from the General Directorate of the Prison Service of the Czech Republic.

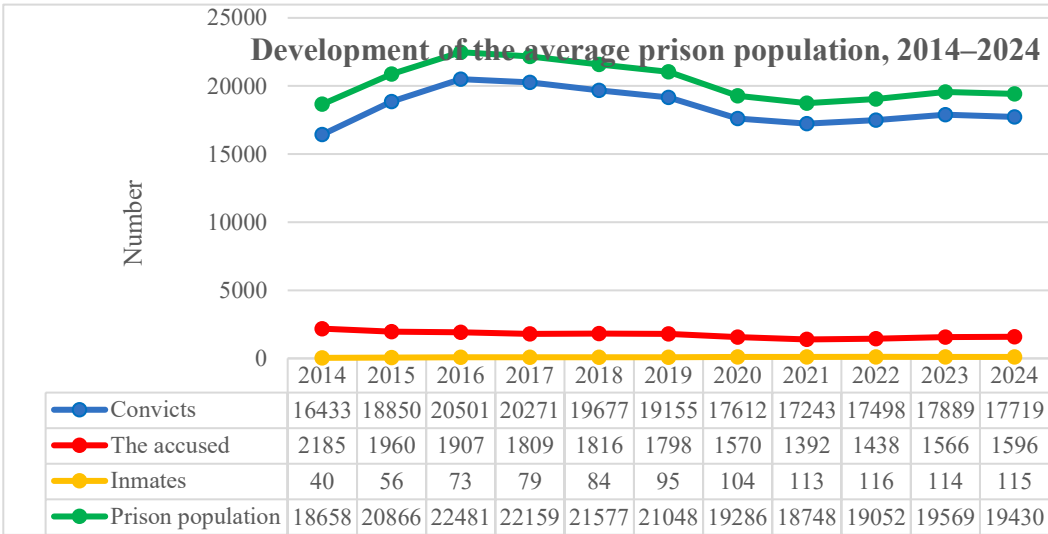
Structure of the prison population and vulnerable groups

While men constitute a significantly larger majority of the prison population, the increasing number of female inmates is a phenomenon that deserves attention. This issue is important not only in terms of prison capacity but also in terms of the costs and necessary support for successful reintegration into society after their release.

Statistics available indicate that women make up about 5% of the total prison population in Europe; however, this ratio varies by country. For example, in the Czech Republic, women form approximately 8% of all inmates, which is higher than the European average. In contrast, countries like Germany and Spain have a lower proportion of women in prison, around 4%. (Czech Statistical Office)

The number of women incarcerated in the Czech Republic has been rising consistently. In 2015, there were 1,433 women in prisons, and by 2022, this number increased to 1,613, representing 8.5% of the total prison population. This increase can largely be attributed to the criminalisation of minor drug offences and a stricter penal policy. The trend has persisted in recent years, pointing to a more permanent change in the demographic structure of the prison population (Statistics of the Prison Service of the Czech Republic).

Graph 1 Overview of the number of imprisoned individuals in the Czech Republic in the period 2014–2024



(Source: own research, Statistical yearbooks Prison Service of the Czech Republic)

From an inclusive perspective, women in prison represent one of the typical vulnerable groups. They often enter prison with histories of domestic or sexual violence, trauma, addiction, and responsibility for children who remain outside the facility. Without targeted support, these factors are easily reflected in the course of imprisonment because they can lead to deepening psychological distress, making it difficult to engage in treatment programs and decreasing the likelihood of a successful reintegration into society.

Other vulnerable groups in prisons include individuals with mental illnesses, foreigners facing language barriers, elderly prisoners, and those with physical disabilities. For all these groups, the general “standard” range of activities may not be genuinely accessible and comprehensible without appropriate adaptations. Therefore, inclusion in practice requires not only formal equality in access to programmes, but also real adaptation to the actual needs and limits of specific convicts.

Prison Service of the Czech Republic and treatment programmes

The Prison Service of the Czech Republic operates under the authority of the Ministry of Justice. It cooperates with the Probation and Mediation Services of the Czech Republic; however, these are two independent organisational units that also fall under the Ministry of Justice. The Prison Service of the Czech Republic ensures the penitentiary care, while the Probation and Mediation Services provide the subsequent post-penitentiary care.

There are 34 prisons and remand centres in the Czech Republic, housing approximately 20,000 inmates. The primary task of the Prison Service of the Czech Republic includes enforcing detention and punishment, forensic detention, maintaining order in court buildings and at the Ministry of Justice, and providing escort services between prisons, to courts, and healthcare facilities.

Czech prison staff is divided into two groups, where one group comprises uniformed officers and the other group comprises civilian employees. The uniformed officers form about two thirds of the staff, which includes, for example, directors and their first representatives, supervisors and guards, preventive officers, escort officers or dog handlers. The remaining one third consists of civilians, such as psychologists, social workers, teachers, educators, health workers, chaplains, administrative workers, workers in the logistics department and the economic department. Overall, the total number of employees is around 11,000 (Jůzl, Vlach, 2022).

The treatment programme is a fundamental tool for incorporating inclusive principles into the daily lives of inmates. In the Czech prison system, this programme primarily focuses on work activities, educational activities, therapeutic programmes, leisure activities, and building external relationships.

An inclusive approach requires that these activities should not merely be formal entries in the prisoner's records, but that they should be truly individualised, i.e. based on an assessment of each prisoner's needs, risks, and strengths.

Foreign experience shows that a well-developed individual plan can significantly reduce the risk of relapse, especially when it combines work with risk factors (e.g. addiction, debt, or problematic relationships) with support from positive sources (e.g. parenting, work experience, or motivation for education). While these principles are well known in the Czech environment, their implementation faces challenges due to high caseloads per professional staff member, administrative burdens, and the limited capacity of specialised programmes.

Education of prisoners as an inclusive tool

The education of convicted individuals within the Czech prison system encompasses both formal school education and non-formal educational courses, retraining, and other forms of lifelong learning. The goals of these educational activities include enhancing qualification levels, increasing motivation to work, and strengthening the social and cognitive competencies necessary for the successful resocialization and reintegration of inmates (Vlach, Stárek, 2025).

Education in prison serves not only to provide vocational training but also plays a crucial role in resocialization, as it helps restore the distorted identity of the convicted person and fosters a renewed sense of responsibility towards society. The value of education extends beyond mere employability; it encompasses a broader psychological, social, and ethical dimension, assisting convicts in reclaiming roles that were interrupted or lost in their previous lives (Stárek, Víšek, 2022).

Effective educational impact cannot be achieved without a professional assessment of educational needs, collaboration among educators, psychologists, social workers, and instructors, and an environment that respects the dignity of prisoners while supporting their intrinsic motivation. This framework is essential for achieving a genuine resocializing effect through education and is one of the prerequisites for creating an inclusive prison environment where educational opportunities are genuinely accessible to the vulnerable groups of inmates. (Daněš, 2024)

Formal education is provided by the Secondary Vocational School of the Prison Service of the Czech Republic, which offers three-year and two-year courses, including courses for individuals with special educational needs, through school education centres located in selected prisons. The study programmes are completed with an apprenticeship certificate and maintain the same standards as education obtained in schools outside the prison environment. The courses

primarily focus on technical trades and services, such as bricklaying, carpentry, cooking, dressmaking, or maintenance services. Importantly, the apprenticeship certificate issued does not indicate the place of imprisonment, which enhances the likelihood of employment after release.

Non-formal education is available in the form of short-term courses, retraining programmes, computer and language courses, and soft skills development programmes. Often, these programmes are organised in cooperation with external educational institutions and non-governmental non-profit organisations. It is this variety of forms that allows for the inclusion of individuals with a limited educational background, who represent a significant portion of the prison population. It is crucial for the inclusion that these programmes are accessible not just to motivated and “problem-free” inmates, but also to those with poor educational experiences, health issues, or social disabilities.

International research shows that participation in formal and vocational education while incarcerated significantly reduces the likelihood of recidivism. Analyses published in recent years have shown that inmates engaged in secondary education have, on average, about 15% lower recidivism rates compared to those with no educational experience, with reductions of up to several tens of percentage points reported for participants in college or vocational programmes (Stickle et al., 2023).

In the Czech context, where the long-term recidivism rate is around 60% and higher rates are prevalent for individuals with low education, systematic support for education in prisons is a vital inclusive strategy. It creates an environment where inmates—including women, foreigners, and other vulnerable groups—can resume their interrupted educational paths, acquire new competences, and experience success as “learners” rather than merely as “inmates”. This transformation in self-concept is one of the key prerequisites for meaningful reintegration after release (Statistical Yearbooks of the Prison Service).

Therefore, from an inclusive perspective, it is advisable for the planning of educational activities in prisons to systematically consider the specific barriers faced by each group, such as language, health condition, psychological or social barriers, and to provide differentiated pathways for participation. In practice, this involves combining basic literacy and social skills courses with specialised programmes tailored for women, young adults, or individuals with mental health issues, while establishing connections to post-release educational opportunities.

Inclusion of women in imprisonment: a gender-sensitive approach

Based on historical developments and available scholarly studies, it has been documented that women's criminality differs from men's criminality in several respects, both in terms of motives and social determinants. Academic literature and available statistics show that women's offending is more often associated with property crime, drug-related offences, and behaviours stemming from long-term social deprivation, addiction, or prior victimisation. In the European context, the Czech Republic has for a long time ranked among the countries with an above-average proportion of women in the total prison population, which emphasises the need to systematically consider the specific needs of incarcerated women (Chesney-Lind, 1989; Heidensohn, 2010).

From an inclusion perspective, women in prison represent a typically vulnerable group. Many of them have experienced domestic or sexual violence, suffer from mental health issues and addictions, and bear responsibility for children who remain outside the facility. These factors influence the course of imprisonment, engagement in treatment and rehabilitation programmes, and the likelihood of successful reintegration after release. When women are placed in programmes primarily designed for men, they often face a form of secondary exclusion—formally, they have access to the offer, but in practice, the programmes do not reflect their life experience or current vulnerability (Salisbury & Crawford, 2025; McLeod et al., 2025).

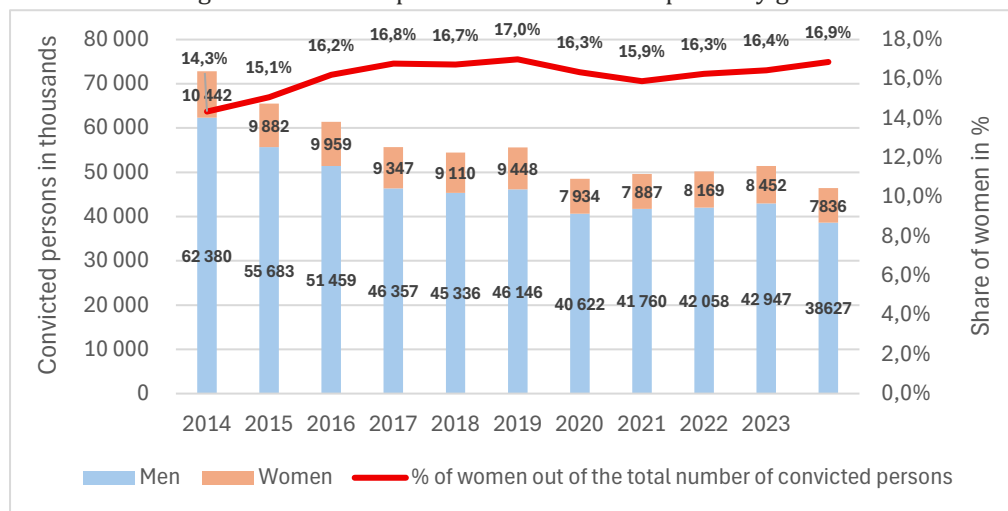
A gender-sensitive approach is, therefore, essential for inclusive prison practices rather than being viewed as an optional addition. In practical terms, this means adapting prison conditions, treatment programmes, and support systems so that they reflect criminogenic factors typical of women—in particular, traumatic experiences, economic dependence, childcare responsibilities, lower levels of education, and limited work experience. Programmes can be regarded as inclusive, especially when they combine trauma-focused therapeutic work, support for parenting skills, educational and vocational preparation, and the strengthening of social ties, including maintaining contact with children and family members (Salisbury & Crawford, 2025).

Experience from other European countries, as well as within the Czech context, suggests that meaningful progress towards the inclusion of women inmates requires strengthening multidisciplinary cooperation (among psychologists, social workers, teachers, health professionals, and non-governmental organisations), expanding the use of alternative sanctions for less serious offences, developing targeted educational and employment programmes, and providing systematic support for transitioning from prison back to community life. Thus, a gender-sensitive approach is not a separate agenda, but an integral part of a broader effort to create a prison system that respects human

dignity and genuinely reduces the risk of reoffending (Daněk, Šotolová & Žolnová, 2023).

Despite these general findings, the specific situation of women in the Czech prison system remains only partially addressed in practice. Although men still constitute the vast majority of inmates, the issues of women's criminality and their imprisonment remain rather neglected in the Czech professional discourse and prison practices. This neglect is reflected in the limited attention given to women's specific needs, such as experiences of trauma, motherhood, mental health issues, emotional bonds with their children, or substance abuse. These factors significantly affect the course of imprisonment and the subsequent prospects for successful resocialization and reintegration into society (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Convicted persons in the Czech Republic by gender



(Source: own processing, data from the Czech Statistical Office)

Inclusion requires a gender-sensitive approach, which is a necessary prerequisite, rather than an additional standard. When women are included in programmes originally designed for men, they often face secondary exclusion. While they may have formal access to the programmes, the reality is that they do not cater to their life experiences or current needs. For instance, addiction treatment that does not take into account long-term violence or childcare responsibilities, or job-oriented programmes that are difficult for female inmates to access, exemplify this issue.

Conversely, programmes that combine therapeutic interventions with social and legal support while facilitating family ties can be considered inclusive. This includes specialised wards for mothers with children, trauma management programmes, and collaboration with the non-profit sector in the areas of debt counselling and preparation for release. However, developing these programmes requires not only professional capacity, but also clear methodological anchoring and support from the prison management.

Barriers to inclusion and the role of staff

Inclusion in the prison environment cannot be established only through formal documents; it primarily depends on the daily practice of the employees of the Prison Service of the Czech Republic. It is the staff who decide in specific situations whether the prisoner will be allowed to participate in programmes, whether they will be given the space to express their needs, or whether their concerns will be taken seriously. An inclusive culture is therefore based on a combination of professional preparedness, ethical attitudes, and support from management support.

Several barriers hinder inclusion, including high workloads, a lack of time for individual work with inmates, concerns about security risks, and persistent stereotypes against certain groups of prisoners (e.g. women convicted of drug offences, or individuals with mental illnesses). Additionally, insufficient training opportunities focused on working with vulnerable groups, effective communication in stressful situations, and prevention of burnout syndrome among employees also play a role.

Practice shows that systematic training for staff in areas such as human rights, restorative approaches, trauma-informed care, and intercultural communication can significantly enhance the inclusive environment in prisons. Effective training methods include not only traditional courses but also supervision, case seminars, and the sharing of best practices among various prisons (Jůzl, Vlach, 2022).

The impact of the prison environment on the mental health of staff

The prison environment is a specific social and institutional system that significantly differs from typical working and living environments. This system is characterised above all by a high level of security measures, a strict management hierarchy, restrictions on individual autonomy, and constant surveillance. Interactions among individuals, whether between staff members or between staff and inmates, are heavily regulated by both formal (legal) rules and unwritten norms (the process of prisonisation is at work here) that are naturally generated in this environment. This “world behind the wall” is closed, strictly structured, and

resistant to any changes. It is this closedness and high level of control that affects the daily reality of both inmates and Prison Service staff. Consequently, staff members experience constant pressure to meet demanding security requirements while managing emotionally tense situations and maintaining a professional distance, often with little opportunity for self-reflection or emotional release.

Prison staff are exposed to chronic psychosocial stress, which stems from the prison's inherent characteristics (closed environment, routine regime, and latent risks), the specific behaviour of prisoners (frustration, aggression, and manipulative behaviour patterns), and the institutional culture (characterised by a command management style, low participation, and insufficient support from the management). Long-term exposure to these stressors can lead to emotional exhaustion, burnout, secondary trauma, and psychosomatic issues (Jůzl, Vlach, 2022).

To better understand these phenomena, Goffman's (1961) theory of total institutions can be used, which emphasises the depersonalization of interpersonal relationships, repression of individuality, and the institutionalisation of behaviour. In this context, employees are placed in a situation where they are expected to continuously exercise authority and simultaneously repress their own authentic emotional expressions. This situation results in so-called emotional dissonance, i.e. a mismatch between inner experience and desired behaviour, which, according to Maslach et al. (2001), has a major impact on the employees' psychological distress and professional integrity.

Research carried out in the Czech environment confirms that most professionals working in the prison system experience symptoms of stress, anxiety, or tension as a direct result of their work, often on a daily or almost daily basis. These results show that psychological strain is a regular part of work reality rather than a marginal issue. If organisations fail to respond with systematic support (e.g., supervision, crisis intervention, or opportunities for sharing experiences), it can lead to an increased sense of powerlessness, resignation, and a loss of meaning in one's work (Vlach, Klugerová, Daněk, 2025).

Prolonged exposure to these stressors can result in not only burnout but also a sense of alienation from the profession, distorted self-perception, and a diminished sense of meaningfulness at work. It is the combination of emotional exposure and lack of support that is one of the significant triggers for negative mental health outcomes among employees in helping professions, which undoubtedly includes the prison service. These findings clearly show that preventive measures in mental health should not be viewed as additional but rather as integral to the institutional culture. Working in the prison environment requires not only professional preparedness and psychological resilience, but also

systematic support, which can take the form of supervision, crisis intervention, or opportunities to share experiences within a safe working environment (Daněk et al., 2023).

From an inclusion perspective, the mental health of staff is directly related to the quality of treatment provided to inmates. Staff members who are overstretched for extended periods, without adequate support and recognition, struggle to perceive the individual needs of inmates and to apply sensitive, differentiated approaches to vulnerable groups. Conversely, an environment that systematically cares for its staff through supervision, stress management programmes, participative management, and open communication creates an inclusive culture that respects the rights and needs of all actors, including inmates.

These findings suggest that an inclusive strategy in prisons should encompass not only programmes aimed at inmates, but also a comprehensive model of institutional mental health care for staff. This model should include regular monitoring of psychological distress, support from team leaders and supervisors, access to professional help, and prevention of maladaptive coping strategies (including the risk of substance use to manage stress). Taking care of staff is not merely an “extra benefit”; it is essential for ensuring the sustainability of an inclusive and human rights-oriented prison system.

Conclusion

The long-term goal is still to create such a prison environment that not only fulfils the expressed purpose of serving a sentence but also respects basic human rights and supports the successful reintegration and resocialisation of individuals serving prison sentences. This approach would not only reduce the costs associated with repeated imprisonment but also contribute to a safer and more stable society capable of effectively addressing issues related to criminal behaviour and recidivism.

Inclusion in the prison system is not a one-off project, but a long-term process that must connect systemic aspects (legislation, strategy, and funding) with daily practices in prisons. The Czech prison system has a number of prerequisites at its disposal, namely professional staff, experience with treatment programmes, and a gradually developing cooperation with other institutions. The challenge in the coming years is to integrate these elements more thoroughly, consider the needs of vulnerable groups, strengthen multidisciplinary cooperation, and systematically support the professional development of staff who are essential carriers of an inclusive culture in their daily interaction with inmates.

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Section 3:

INCLUSION IN HUNGARIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

LEARNING LANGUAGES AND LANGUAGE EXAMS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN HUNGARY¹

Výučba jazykov a jazykové skúšky pre študentov so zdravotným postihnutím v Maďarsku

Magdolna Nemes²

Abstract: Nowadays, it is almost expected that one should speak several languages as an adult, a requirement that stems from both an increasingly multicultural environment and the demands of competitiveness in the labour market. Based on this, it is reasonable to expect that students with disabilities and university students should also have the opportunity to learn languages and then to learn the professional language related to their degree. The study also deals with the regulation of language teaching in Hungarian schools and issues related to foreign language proficiency exams. In order to ensure effective university language teaching and subject-specific language teaching (such as English for Specific Purposes), it is important to consider the form in which language learning takes place, especially in the case of students with disabilities. It then goes on to present the specific characteristics of foreign language learning and teaching for students with disabilities (dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia; visually impaired, hearing impaired, physically disabled students, students with speech and language disorders). The study also presents the opportunities offered by three language examination systems developed in Hungary (ORIGO, BME, DExam) and one international language examination system (ECL) in terms of the regulations they apply to examinees with disabilities.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes, examinees with disabilities, regulations, university students

Abstrakt: V súčasnosti sa takmer očakáva, že dospelý človek by mal ovládať viacero jazykov, čo je požiadavka vyplývajúca jednak z čoraz multikultúrnejšieho prostredia, jednak z požiadaviek konkurencieschopnosti na trhu práce. Na základe toho je rozumné očakávať, že študenti so zdravotným postihnutím a vysokoškolskí študenti by mali mať tiež možnosť učiť sa jazyky a následne sa učiť odborný jazyk súvisiaci s ich štúdiom. Štúdiá sa zaoberá aj reguláciou výučby cudzích jazykov na maďarských školách a otázkami súvisiacimi so skúškami z cudzích jazykov. S cieľom zabezpečiť efektívnu výučbu cudzích jazykov na vysokých školách a výučbu jazykov zameranú na konkrétne predmety (napríklad angličtina pre špecifické účely) je dôležité zvážiť formu, v akej sa výučba cudzích jazykov uskutočňuje, najmä v prípade študentov so zdravotným postihnutím. Štúdiá sa ďalej zaoberá špecifickými charakteristikami výučby a štúdiá cudzích jazykov pre študentov so zdravotným postihnutím (dyslexia, dysgrafia, dyskalkúlia; študenti so zrakovým alebo sluchovým postihnutím, telesným postihnutím, poruchami reči a jazyka). Štúdiá tiež predstavuje možnosti, ktoré ponúkajú tri systémy jazykových skúšok vyvinuté v Maďarsku (ORIGO, BME, DExam) a jeden medzinárodný systém jazykových skúšok (ECL) z hľadiska predpisov, ktoré sa vzťahujú na skúšaných so zdravotným postihnutím.

Kľúčové slová: angličtina pre špecifické účely, skúšanie so zdravotným postihnutím, predpisy, vysokoškolskí študenti.

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Introduction

The factors that determine foreign language proficiency patterns and levels form a complex system that collectively shapes individual results. Language learning and language skills are extremely important today, as mobility, international communication, and working abroad are part of everyday life. In the 21st century, partly due to digitalization, the use of the target language takes place in a completely different environment and form.

The European Union treats foreign language teaching and its development as a priority in its basic documents. European documents set out three basic principles: lifelong language learning, starting language acquisition at a very early age, and exploiting the opportunities offered by content-based language teaching. In 2001, the Council of Europe declared September 26 the European Day of Languages to emphasize the importance of language learning. In 2002, at its meeting in Barcelona, the Council of Europe called for the development of foreign language skills and set intermediate language proficiency (B2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference, CEFR) as a target. The European Union's goal is for citizens to speak two languages at least at an intermediate level (known as the M+2 guideline) in addition to their first (mother) language (mother tongue or L1). Based on the idea of a trilingual European citizen, a directive was drafted and adopted, according to which children should start learning languages at a very young age.

In line with the European Union's education policy, Decree 2/2005. (III.1.) OM regulates the integrated education of students with special educational needs (SEN) in Hungary. According to Article 4(25) of Act CXCV of 2011 on national public education, which is still in force today, a child or student with special educational needs is a child or student who, based on the expert opinion of a committee of experts, requires special treatment due to a motor, sensory, intellectual or speech impairment, multiple disabilities in the case of co-occurrence of several disabilities, autism spectrum disorder or other psychological developmental disorders (severe learning, attention or behavioral disorders). According to the provisions of the Public Education Act, the category of other psychological developmental disorders includes various learning and behavioural disorders such as dyslexia dysgraphia, dyscalculia, attention deficit disorder and hyperactivity.

Students with special educational needs have several options for fulfilling their educational obligations, depending on the type and severity of their disability. If a student who has not previously shown any problems at school is assessed by the teacher(s) or parent(s) as having behavioral and/or learning problems during the school year (e.g., because the student child is not progressing in mastering the curriculum according to their abilities), they may seek an expert

opinion from the regionally competent educational service. The expert examination must be requested in writing by completing the appropriate form and attaching the requested documents. The consent of the school principal must be attached to the request for an expert assessment. The school principal will also seek the opinion of the student's class teacher and the teacher of the subject causing the difficulty before making a decision. The parent's signature confirms the initiation of the expert assessment. Parents may also initiate an examination by the educational specialist service. If the expert committee determines that the child/student has special educational needs, special care must be provided in accordance with the expert opinion of the expert committee, regardless of the type of education system (primary or secondary school) and work schedule (e.g., daytime, evening) of the student. The Public Education Act ensures that students with special educational needs who are taught in an integrated setting can be assessed according to their abilities through a system of exemptions and accommodations from certain subjects or parts of subjects. These may include (1) complete exemption from subject assessment and grade-based evaluation, (2) partial exemption, (3) variation in the forms of assessment, (4) provision of assistive devices, and (5) variations of all of the above. The expert opinion may also make further recommendations regarding assessments, e.g., longer time for writing papers or reading texts; use of computers. Differentiation of the curriculum can also be achieved in several ways: in terms of the quantity and quality of the curriculum (the depth of the knowledge imparted), as well as in terms of time and subject matter. To facilitate the assessment process, teachers can apply different solutions to different problems; for example, in the case of reading comprehension difficulties, the teacher can read the tasks to the student.

1. Learning languages in the age of AI and Chat GPT

In the age of artificial intelligence, the importance of language skills is not diminishing, but rather transforming: beyond simple knowledge of grammatical rules, critical thinking, understanding of linguistic nuances and cultural context are becoming key (OECD, 2018; Kramsch, 2006). Although artificial intelligence (AI) tools such as Google Translate and DeepL have improved significantly and are excellent for producing raw translations, they often struggle to convey more complex, culturally specific expressions, irony, humour or subtle nuances of meaning. Human language skills are essential for checking and refining the quality of machine translation. In business and personal relationships, empathy, trust, and real understanding require human linguistic interaction. AI cannot replace personal communication, non-verbal cues, and emotional intelligence (Móser, 2025; Mező, 2025), which are an integral part of language skills. Language skills continue to be a competitive advantage in the labour market, especially for

companies operating in a globalised environment (OECD, 2019; Cedefop, 2016). They also support personal development, learning about new cultures and agility in a constantly changing world. Overall, AI is an effective tool for language learning and communication, but it does not replace human language skills; rather, it supplements them, requiring new skills and abilities from people.

The success of language learning depends on a number of factors, which are divided into two main groups (external and internal factors). External factors include the extent and quantity of language input, while internal factors include motivation, learning strategies, and language aptitude. The latter is very controversial: some authors reject the existence of language aptitude, while others acknowledge it. Language aptitude is an innate, multifactorial ability that relates to the acquisition, understanding, and use of language, and although it may be based on an innate predisposition, it can be developed and improved through practice, the right attitude, and regular language use. Language sense helps us to intuitively grasp grammatical rules, recognize correct expressions, and use language naturally, which is especially important when learning foreign languages (Szabó, 2020). Language aptitude is difficult to change. Researchers at Harvard University also studied language aptitude between 1953 and 1958 because they found that students with excellent intellectual abilities had difficulty learning foreign languages. According to Ottó (1996), linguistic aptitude consists of several factors: memory, auditory and analytical abilities, while Carroll (1990) added to this by proposing a detailed exploration of the cognitive processes underlying language learning (cited in Tánčzos, 2006).

Successful language learning requires seriality, the ability to retrieve and encode information in the correct order. In addition, successful language learning depends on a number of other factors, such as IQ, personality traits, native language and learning abilities, as well as logical, associative, and grammatical sensitivity. Age is also an important factor: different patterns have been observed in older and younger language learners (Sominé, 2011). Cognitive aging must also be taken into account in language learning: processing speed decreases, working memory is incomplete, and the ability to concentrate decreases (Sominé, 2011). Language learning is aided by the ideal L2 self, i.e., the extent to which the language learner can imagine themselves as a successful language user. The ideal L2 self refers to the person the language learner wants to become by acquiring the target language. This future self-image is the main driving force behind the learner's intrinsic motivation, which consists of positive emotions towards language learning and the learner imagining themselves communicating fluently and confidently in the target language. Language learning is not just about acquiring skills, but also becomes part of one's personal identity. According to

Dörnyei's (2005) theory, the more vivid, detailed, and achievable this ideal image appears to the learner, the stronger their motivation to learn will be.

Ziegler and Goswami pointed out that the number of letters representing a single phonological unit varies across languages, which can influence the success of reading and writing acquisition in both native language learning and foreign language learning (cited in Magnuczné, 2017). Hungarian, Finnish, and German are transparent spelling languages because the number of letters representing a single phonological unit is small and grapheme-phoneme correspondence is easier to establish. These languages are characterized by one letter corresponding to one sound, and the two-letter-one-sound relationship is rare (Magnuczné, 2017).

According to Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences, human intelligence is not a single, general ability (IQ), but consists of at least eight relatively distinct areas. In pedagogical practice, musical, social, physical-kinesthetic, spatial (visual) intelligence, as well as cultural understanding and differentiated instruction play a role in the acquisition of the target language culture. Gardner's theories emphasize that successful language and culture acquisition involves the learner's motivation towards the culture (Gardner, & Lambert, 1972) and the use of varied methods in teaching based on different intelligences. According to Gardner, the language learning situation (e.g., teacher, class, methods, learner attitude, etc.) also plays an important role in the success of language learning. In his multi-component model, Spolsky (1989) writes that the vitality of the language being learned (cf. Latin) and its social preference are also important (Sominé, 2011). Language learners always follow unique paths of development, and the factors influencing learning success can compensate for each other. Supporting native language skills directly contributes to the effectiveness of foreign language learning, but it also has a stimulating effect on the development of the learner's personality.

2. School and language learning

In language learning, the following skills are assessed in primary and secondary education: reading comprehension, writing, listening comprehension, speaking and grammar/use of English. In language exams, whether at basic, intermediate, or advanced levels, examiners assess these same skills. The oral part of the exam includes oral comprehension and speaking, as well as listening comprehension. In the written part of the exam, language learners demonstrate their reading comprehension skills. Letter-writing tasks test their ability to compose written texts. Grammar is assessed indirectly in some language exams, while certain exams explicitly test knowledge and application of grammatical rules. Intercultural competence is not measured in school-leaving exams or

language exams, but it is very important: it is the ability to get along with people who speak a different language and have a different cultural background, and to be able to make oneself understood (observation, interpretation, comparison).

In Hungary, all secondary school students must take an intermediate-level language exam, which requires intermediate proficiency (B1 level) according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Advanced level exams are equivalent to intermediate level B2. If students wish to continue their studies at university, they receive extra points for language exams when applying for university. While studying at a university, language exams can provide extra points for scholarships, getting a place in a dormitory or even exemption from obligatory language courses (but not from language courses for specific purposes).

However, in the period after 2024, the number of language exam takers in Hungary followed the trend of previous years and showed a downward trend, falling to a low point. While ten years ago, approximately 130,000 people took language exams each year, by 2024 this number had fallen to less than 60,000 (a total of 58,969 people) (<https://nyak.oh.gov.hu/doc/statisztika.asp>). The decline in the number of language exam takers is primarily due to the fact that since 2019, a B2 language exam is no longer a central requirement for admission to higher education. During the Covid-19 pandemic, a language exam moratorium was introduced, allowing students to receive their diplomas without having to pass a B2-level language exam. From 2024, universities will decide at their own discretion whether to require a language exam as an entry or exit requirement for obtaining a degree that certifies the qualifications necessary to practice a given profession. The decline in the number of language exams is particularly noticeable in the over-20 age group, including university students. Although many people still take exams in English (although the number is declining there too), the decline is even more dramatic for less common languages (<https://nyak.oh.gov.hu/doc/statisztika.asp>). However, the competencies acquired by the end of higher education include the expectation of proficiency in at least one foreign language (e.g., medical terminology, (special) education, etc.) as well as an open and welcoming attitude toward learning foreign languages.

3. Foreign language learning and teaching for university students with disabilities

Teachers can apply different solutions to different problems in order to facilitate foreign language teaching and assessment. These are presented below.

3.1 Dyslexia (BNO F 81.0)

Students with dyslexia not only find writing and reading in a foreign language difficult, but also have difficulty with speaking and listening comprehension (Gátas-Aubelj, 2025; Nemes, 2024, 2022). Language learners may have trouble processing auditory and visual stimuli, as well as perceiving sentence structures and word boundaries. They find it difficult to remember the rules of word formation and understand the relationship between spelling and pronunciation. It is also characteristic that language learners find it more difficult to notice similarities and differences between the vocabulary and grammar of their native language and the foreign language (Tánczos, 2006). Dyslexic students are characterized by homogeneous inhibition, i.e., words that sound similar (*waiter/water, which/witch, idea/ideal, tidy/tiny*), look similar (*unit/until, customs/costume, drive/drove/draw*), have similar meanings (*shoes/socks*) or opposite meanings (*after/before; cheap/expensive*), or words that are not similar to each other (*parents/presents, chemistry/cemetery; energy/engineer; together/each other; traffic/factory, clear/clever; subway/suburbs; accident/advance, cupboard/cardboard/carton, angry/hungry*).

Homogeneous inhibition delays the development of mental lexicon, making it difficult for students to recall what they have learned. They also have difficulty understanding texts and need more time and practice (Kohlmann, 2010). Errors resulting from homogeneous inhibition are also clearly noticeable at the sentence level. When answering the question "*What can make a holiday expensive?*", the language learner starts talking about how a vacation can be inexpensive, e.g., camping, cycling, etc. When asked "*What type of services do travel agents offer us?*", the language learner starts talking about buying a home and the services of estate agents. "*Why do people prefer to travel independently?*" asks the teacher, and the learner begins to list the advantages and disadvantages of travelling in a group.

Reading aloud in a foreign language makes it even harder for them to understand the text; and font type and size can also be distracting. For tasks that require writing, work sheets can be printed in a larger font size, longer breaks can be taken between exam sections, and it is worth ensuring that there is adequate lighting. For worksheets and written materials designed for dyslexic language learners, it is recommended to use a font that is easier to read <https://www.dafont.com/open-dyslexic.font>. Word explanations can help with the interpretation of the texts to be read. It is also helpful if students receive

grammar exercises and comprehension questions in advance in printed form rather than having to copy them from the board, and online teaching materials can also be of assistance (Kubingen-Pillmann, & Györe, 2025).

For dyslexic students, multisensory techniques (MLS) and communicative language teaching methods can be excellent tools. The student not only hears but also sees the material to be learned. In addition, it can help if they can touch and hold things in their hands, e.g., bones in anatomy, technical objects, etc. Outside the classroom, tandem learning is a good way to practice language skills – a native Hungarian speaker regularly talks to a foreign student learning Hungarian, for example, they go to the botanical garden together and talk about plants. Foreign-language YouTube videos, films, and series, as well as listening to music in the target language, can also help with learning new words and expressions. Instead of a written test or exam, students can be asked to produce a piece of work on the topic they have learned (in the form of a drawing, video, audio file, lapbook, mind map, or poster) or to prepare and give a presentation. Students who work at a slower pace can be given more time to complete tasks and write papers. If a student experiences anxiety or inhibition, it is recommended that they be tested individually rather than in a group (e.g., giving a presentation in a foreign language), for example, at the teacher's desk while the others are working on the task.

During the examination, the examiner may provide special conditions for examinees, for example, a dyslexic examinee may work in a separate room, be given more time and/or a laptop to complete foreign language tasks. It is also possible for someone to read the text/task aloud. For tasks that require writing, the task sheet can be printed in a larger font size, longer breaks can be taken between exam sections, and it is worth ensuring that there is adequate lighting. During the oral language exam, take into account the candidates' problems (e.g., confusion of directions, confusion of similar-sounding words, etc.).

3.2 Dysgraphia (BNO F 81)

Dysgraphia makes language learning difficult, as writing and spelling difficulties (letter substitution, letter omission, incorrect line spacing) make it extra hard to learn foreign words and grammar structures, but with focused development (dictation, letter practice, developing a sense of rhythm, expanding vocabulary), good results can be achieved.

In case of writing difficulties (illegible handwriting), the student replaces the written exam with an oral exam, or writes in a special notebook with larger line spacing, or works on a laptop. Students who work at a slower pace are given more time to complete assignments and write midterm exams. It is also helpful if students receive grammar exercises and questions related to listening or reading

comprehension in advance in printed form, rather than having to copy them from the board.

3.3 Dyscalculia (BNO F81.2)

Dyscalculia primarily involves difficulties with arithmetic, but because it stems from a different way of processing information in the brain, it is often accompanied by other learning disorders such as dyslexia (reading disorder), which can cause problems with language learning (vocabulary, grammar rules, pronunciation). Dyscalculia can cause difficulties in memorizing words, numbers, and dates, understanding grammar rules, and reading foreign-language texts, but with appropriate development, significant improvement can be achieved (Czenner, 2015).

Dyscalculia primarily manifests itself in tasks involving counting and numbers, such as learning numbers, mathematical tasks, and rules in a foreign language. Therefore, it is advisable to learn the foreign language words associated with these tasks by engaging multiple sensory channels, e.g., visual, auditory, motor, etc. Students with dyscalculia can be helped by using cards (linking words and pictures), movement (associating words with movement), and short dialogues and repetitive patterns in regular classroom use. Students are advised to use colour codes to identify grammatical rules and structures. Language learning apps that provide visual and audio assistance are also useful. During tests, it is recommended to allow extra time and give fewer tasks, and students can use various tools during class and tests.

3.4 Students with visual impairment

Visual impairment does not prevent language learning; most blind or visually impaired students are able to keep pace with their sighted peers by using special methods and tools. For the visually impaired, auditory comprehension and verbal communication play a key role. In the case of the visually impairment, the emphasis is on learning through sight with the help of special visual aids, but hearing and touch play a significant role compared to their sighted peers. The (language) teacher should use large, colourful pictures for illustration. For blind students, it is essential to learn the written form of the foreign language with the help of Braille writing and reading (Báthori et al., 2008). Embossed or tactile maps and diagrams also help to understand the context. Modern technology offers numerous opportunities for barrier-free language learning, such as audiobooks, audio materials, screen reader software, etc. Various "talking" products (e.g., dictionaries, smart watches) make everyday life and language learning easier.

3.5 Students with hearing impairment

Hearing impairment does not mean that it is impossible to learn a foreign language, although the process involves unique challenges and requires special methods and tools (Domagała-Zyśk, &Kontra, 2016). Auditory input is limited or incomplete, which makes it difficult to learn pronunciation, intonation, and speech rhythm. Practicing verbal communication can be difficult due to difficulties in understanding spoken text. Students with hearing impairments are in a special situation, as they have already had to overcome countless difficulties in learning their first language, and neither teacher training nor the foreign language textbook and teaching aid market is adequately prepared for their needs.

Visual aids are extremely useful for language learners with hearing impairments. The instructor/language teacher should use pantomime, body language, and facial expressions to supplement communication. If necessary, write down information and words. Watching subtitled content (original or translated) is a great way to improve comprehension and vocabulary development. Making flashcards, taking notes, and emphasizing written assignments are effective methods for developing writing skills. Association of words and concepts with images aids memorization (Kontráné et al., 2009).

The lecturer should speak slowly and clearly, but should not shout, exaggerate, or over-articulate. Exaggeration and over-emphasizing words distort lip movements, making lip reading even more difficult. Lip reading can be made easier if the instructor faces the hearing-impaired student when communicating important information in a foreign language. Do not stand in front of a window or bright light. If students are working in groups, allow the deaf student to choose their own seat. Announce in advance any technical terms or rare foreign words that are likely to be used! It is difficult, if not impossible, to read speech and sign language with unfamiliar vocabulary. If it is not possible to introduce new vocabulary in advance, write the words and expressions on paper, a board, or in the presentation. A short outline or preliminary script will make the presentation or film screening easier for deaf people to follow. Use visual aids whenever possible. Sight is the primary channel of information for deaf people. Make use of the tools available, including films, overhead projectors, diagrams, and charts. Give the participants time to read before you start speaking. Many hearing-impaired people find it difficult to listen to the speaker and take notes at the same time.

Modern hearing aids help with sound recognition, which is also beneficial for language learning. Apps such as Duolingo, Xeropan, and Memrise support language learning with interactive, visual-based exercises. Translation programs can help with quick comprehension, but are only recommended as a supplementary tool for language learning.

3.6 Students with motor impairment

Physical disabilities do not mean that learning a foreign language is impossible, but they do require a special approach, accessibility, and assistive technologies in order to learn successfully. Certain physical disabilities may be accompanied by other partial disabilities, such as speech and language difficulties, which can negatively affect language learning. In the case of writing difficulties (illegible handwriting), the student may replace the written exam with an oral exam, or write in a special notebook with larger line spacing, or work on a laptop. Modern technology and special teaching methods offer a wide range of options for language learners with physical disabilities, such as special mice/keyboards to assist with writing in cases of severe mobility impairment. Speech recognition software (voice-to-text) allows students to type using their voice. Making digital teaching materials and e-learning platforms accessible is key.

If a student is anxious or inhibited, it is recommended that they be tested individually rather than in front of the class, and that they give their presentation in the foreign language, for example, at the teacher's desk while the others are doing something else.

3.7 Speech and language impairment

Language learning requires special, personalized methods and support for students with speech and language disorders. Approaches based on different senses (hearing, sight, movement) can help reinforce language elements (e.g., incorporating images, videos, movement tasks). Students struggling with language barriers often feel anxious about speaking, so it is important to create a safe, supportive learning environment where making mistakes is not a problem. The main goal of language learning is communication, so instead of rigid grammar rules, the emphasis should focus on practical communication situations and vocabulary expansion. There are many apps and software programs that use games and visual aids to support language learning for people with speech and language disorders.

4. The language exam and its legal background in Hungary

In many cases, language exams are essential for higher education and employment, and in certain fields (e.g., tourism and hospitality), language exams are a prerequisite for obtaining a degree. At the same time, language learning is one of the greatest challenges for students with specific learning difficulties. In Hungary, the principle of equal and fair treatment applies to state-recognized (accredited) language exams. According to Act CXCV of 2011 on national public education, accommodations for applicants with difficulties in integration, learning, or behavioural issues can only be requested and provided in public

education and cannot be taken into account during the language exam and its evaluation.

According to 137/2008 V.16. (Korm.rend. 8.§ f.) the accredited Examination Centres must provide examination conditions for people with disabilities that are appropriate to their disabilities. However, the various language examination systems offer different accommodations to examinees with disabilities. An examinee may indicate that they have a disability when applying, so that the examination centres can organize their examination on the basis of the principle of individualized treatment. When registering, candidates must upload the written decision of the expert committee (87/2015. (IV. 9.) Government Decree 63.§ 2. expert opinion of the Expert Committee) or the decision establishing the disability. During the examination, the candidate's gender, age, and ethnic origin shall not influence the examination results, and everyone shall be treated equally during the examination and the evaluation of the results, and no candidate without a disability shall be placed at an unfair advantage.

The examination centres can provide special conditions for examinees during the examination, for example, the examinee works in a separate room, is given more time and/or a laptop to complete the tasks. In the case of language exams, dyslexic examinees may be exempted from the grammar section of the exam (e.g., no gap filling tasks). It is also possible that the text for the listening comprehension task will not be played from a recording, but will be read aloud by someone. If necessary, for tasks that require writing, the test paper is printed in a larger font size, longer breaks are taken between parts of the exam, or special attention is paid to ensuring adequate lighting. It is important to note that examinees do not always exercise this right and do not request accommodations for completing the language exam tasks. Most examination centres allow themselves the opportunity to refuse the application if the required special conditions can not be provided to the test taker.

The DExam language examination system developed at the University of Debrecen offers various opportunities for examinees with dyslexia and dysgraphia. Examinees can request test papers with larger font sizes for the listening comprehension and reading comprehension and language skills sections of the exam, and they can be exempted from copying their answers onto the answer sheet. In addition, they may use a computer word processor for the Reading and Language Skills and Writing Skills tests, and may request an additional 30 minutes of testing time for the Writing Skills test. Candidates with dyslexia may request that their spelling not be included in their score. Additional accommodations recommended in the expert opinions issued by the expert committees will be granted on a case-by-case basis. Special requirements

regarding exam conditions must be indicated on the Application Form, and the relevant supporting documents must be attached (https://www.dexam.hu/?p=p2_vsp&l=hu).

The ORIGO examination system may grant additional accommodations to dyslexic examinees at the Examination Centre and designated examination sites, taking into account examination security and professional requirements, if there is a verified need. In the written exam, the original duration of the exam may be extended by 10% (in the case of hearing impaired, dyslexic, and dysgraphic examinees). During the listening comprehension exam, it is permitted to listen to the audio texts more than once without additional time (for candidates with limited hand movement, visual impairment, hearing impairment, dyslexia, and dysgraphia). Candidates with disabilities must attach a recent medical opinion describing their condition to their application. After processing the application, the examination centre staff will contact the applicant to arrange for accommodations (<https://www.onyc.hu/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Vizsgaszabalyzat-vegleges.pdf>).

The BME examination system also applies a special procedure for persons with disabilities: in the case of disabilities and special educational needs certified in accordance with Section 63(2) of Government Decree 87/2015. (IV. 9.) Government Decree, applicants with a certified disability or special educational needs may take the exam under a special examination procedure based on a written request submitted to the examination centre or examination venue, provided that they are able to complete the task(s) in each part of the exam in accordance with Government Decree 137/2008. Applications for individual arrangements are handled on a case-by-case basis within the framework provided by the law and the possibilities of the examination venue, whether they concern visual or hearing impairment, mobility impairment, autism spectrum disorder, specific learning disorders (dyslexia, dysgraphia), ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), or psychosocial disabilities. Individual requests for special arrangements can be considered at the time of application (due to the organization of the exam), but no later than 14 days before the first exam date. The submitted request will be evaluated by the head of the Examination Centre based on the attached expert opinion, and the applicant will be notified of the result in writing. The following can be provided during the special arrangements: extra time for the exam, which may be up to 30% of the time allotted for completing the tasks. It is possible to conduct the exam individually rather than in a group, in which case special arrangements can be made (e.g., reading aloud instead of using a machine, use of a Braille typewriter, use of a special magnifying device). During the written part of the exam, computers may be used by examinees with limited mobility, or by any examinee whose handwriting is so illegible or

difficult to read that it would hinder the evaluation. The use of personal computers is only permitted if they have a limited number of special programs installed (e.g., text readers). In the case of examinees with dyslexia or dysgraphia, individually tailored exam materials (font, layout, etc.) may be provided, taking into account the relevant professional recommendations (http://www.bmenyelvvizsga.bme.hu/hu/fogyatekkal_elok/jelentkezes).

The European Consortium for the Certificate of Attainment in Modern Languages (ECL) Examination Centre creates examination conditions for people with disabilities that are appropriate to their disabilities. The application form required for the individual procedure is available in printed form at the examination centres and at the ECL Examination Centre, as well as electronically. In the case of other disabilities, the Examination Centre assists individuals in taking the exam through individually tailored procedures, provided that the requirements specified by law are met. In the case of individual procedures, there are no changes to the content of the exam material. The changes are purely formal.

In cases of dyslexia and/or dysgraphia, the candidate will receive exam materials in a special format in the reading, writing, and listening comprehension sections to ensure adequate readability. The tasks are printed on bright yellow paper, in a larger font size and 1.5 line spacing, using a special font (Dyslexic font) and without fully justifying. The duration of the written parts of the exam may be extended up to 30%. The language book entitled *The Most Hated Topics at the ECL Exam – Level B2 /Dyslexia* (2019) by Szilvia Szabó, John Barefield, and Eszter Papp, published by Szabó Nyelviskola Kft., is designed for learners with dyslexia. This book, which prepares students for the intermediate language exam (B2), provides valuable assistance to learners with dyslexia. The book is a revised version of the 2018 book *The Most Hated Topics at the ECL Exam*. The book is printed on cream-coloured paper with a legible font, larger font size, larger line spacing, and without justified lines. The book prepares students for both the oral and written parts of the ECL language exam. A printed dictionary may be used to complete the writing tasks, but electronic dictionaries are not permitted. The exercises come with an answer key and downloadable audio files in mp3 format. With the download code, students can access the B2 level exam description, exam sections, topic list, useful exam tips, and extra online exercises at <https://audio.szabonyelviskola.hu>.

In the case of motor coordination disorders, candidates are allowed to use their own laptop without an internet connection. In this case, the Examination Centre will provide the test in electronic form instead of paper format. The duration of the written parts of the exam may be extended by 30 %.

In the case of hearing impairment, the listening comprehension text will be played three times instead of twice. Headphones may be used, or loud playback in a separate room may be requested. In cases of severe hearing impairment (based

on a medical opinion), the exam centre will provide a specialist teacher to read aloud upon request, thus enabling lip reading. The candidate may take the speaking exam without other candidates present.

For visually impaired candidates, the Examination Centre prepares exam materials in a special format: the tasks are presented in a larger (selectable) font size and line spacing, using the Verdana font. The duration of the written parts of the exam may be extended by 30%. Blind candidates may have a specialist teacher available for the listening comprehension section of the exam, who will play the recording and then read the questions aloud. The exam centre will provide the specialist teacher, taking into account the rules on conflicts of interest. For the written skills, the candidate must have their own laptop without an internet connection. In the independent topic discussion part of the speaking exam, the ECL Exam Centre will not use visual stimuli for blind candidates, who will express their opinion on a topic described verbally. In the case of dysgraphic candidates, if justified by an expert opinion, the candidate may write the exam on a laptop without an internet connection and use an electronic dictionary on their laptop (<https://ecl.hu/eselyegyenloseg/>).

Summary and conclusions

A review of the literature revealed that there is still ongoing experimentation in the field of compulsory foreign language and field-specific language teaching for university students with disabilities. Language learning is a long process that requires flexibility, gradual progression, and a lot of practice and repetition. In addition to using and solving digital tasks, language teachers need countless ideas to keep English classes useful, varied, and interesting for language learners. Following the teacher's examples, language learners can independently create tools that facilitate the learning and application of words and grammar. In both university language classes and specialized professional language classes (such as English for Specific Purposes), it is important to take into account the human factor and reliability, as well as individual needs, even with the help of a language teacher specializing in teaching the hearing impaired. It may also be necessary to involve a support teacher or assistant to help the student with classroom tasks or the use of assistive devices.

In language teaching, the goal is never to teach grammar alone, but rather to present grammar and vocabulary together. Language learners with disability study alongside their peers, developing their social skills while also gaining knowledge about a new culture. This is why we can say that language teaching is integrated skill development. Problems encountered in the native language also affect the foreign language learning skills of the students concerned. For language learners with disabilities, it is helpful to involve different senses in the learning

process, such as visual aids, drawings, and flashcards. The key is a multimodal approach, i.e., one based on multiple senses and channels, which utilizes auditory, visual, and cognitive strategies. Students find it easier to remember information when they see, hear, and "move" it. Educational programmes tailored to individual needs (e.g. focusing on auditory methods in cases of writing difficulties) make learning more effective. Raising awareness of the practical uses of language skills (e.g. travel, employment) increases student motivation and self-confidence.

We believe that despite the difficulties and challenges, language teachers at universities should aim to create varied and exciting tasks for their students with disability, as these are what motivate language learners. Traditional written tests are not suitable for students with disabilities; instead, other forms of assessment are recommended (videos, projects, mind maps, presentations). Memory aids also help students recall what they have learned. Anything that helps students with disabilities recall information can be a memory aid.

In the second part of the study, we used the example of an internationally recognized language exam system (ECL) and three Hungarian-developed language exams (DExam, ORGO, and BME) to show the special conditions provided for language test takers with disabilities, such as small classrooms, extended test time, laptops, someone reading the text aloud, bigger letters/larger size, longer breaks between parts, appropriate lighting, etc. Each language exam system decides independently on the accommodations to be provided to students with disabilities. A test preparation book related to the internationally recognized ECL exam system has been published for dyslexic language learners preparing for the exam. The difficulties faced by people with dyslexia are also taken into account during the exam, making the language exam "barrier-free" in this respect. Examinees receive the test questions printed on grey or light-yellow paper in 14-point Arial/Verdana font. Test takers may also be given extra time (10 – 30 %) and spelling is not taken into account in the written part. The use of aids (e.g., laptops without internet connection in cases of dysgraphia) is permitted in the written exam.

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PROBLEMS OF TEACHING HISTORY TO STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES¹

Problémy výučby dejín u žiakov s poruchami učenia

Katalin Mező²

Abstract: In the Hungarian public education system, the teaching of history appears among the subjects of the upper grades of primary school (National Core Curriculum, 2020), and therefore it is also included among the instructional expectations for students with learning disabilities with special educational needs. However, the teaching of history to students with learning disabilities is hindered and influenced by numerous factors, which require the application of differentiated knowledge and methods on the part of history teachers and/or special education teachers responsible for teaching history. The aim of this study is to present the main factors that impede and influence the learning of history among students with learning disabilities. In addition, a questionnaire survey conducted among teachers who teach history ($n = 80$) is presented, in which we analysed teachers' opinions regarding three themes about teaching history from the aspect of students with learning disabilities: 1. Understanding of curriculum content, 2. Usefulness of curriculum content, and 3. Usefulness of learning aids. The data were processed using the SPSS software, applying descriptive statistics and the Chi-square test. The 58,75% of the teachers doubt whether their students with learning disabilities have understood the body of curricular knowledge communicated within history education. Teachers' 92,5% think that students with learning disabilities will not use the content of the subject history in their later lives. There is high (more than 90%) agreement among teachers regarding the usefulness of interactive whiteboards and educational games in the context of teaching history to students with learning disabilities.

Keywords: history, teaching, learning, disabilities.

Abstrakt: V maďarskom verejnom vzdelávacom systéme sa výučba dejepisu objavuje medzi predmetmi vyšších ročníkov základnej školy (Národný základný učebný plán, 2020), a preto je zahrnutá aj medzi vzdelávacie očakávania pre žiakov s poruchami učenia so špeciálnymi vzdelávacími potrebami. Výučba dejepisu žiakov s poruchami učenia je však obmedzovaná a ovplyvňovaná mnohými faktormi, ktoré vyžadujú uplatňovanie diferencovaných vedomostí a metód zo strany učiteľov dejepisu a/alebo učiteľov špeciálnej pedagogiky zodpovedných za výučbu dejepisu. Cieľom tejto štúdie je predstaviť hlavné faktory, ktoré bránia a ovplyvňujú výučbu dejepisu u žiakov s poruchami učenia. Okrem toho je predstavený dotazníkový prieskum realizovaný medzi učiteľmi, ktorí vyučujú dejepis ($n = 80$), v ktorom sme analyzovali názory učiteľov na tri témy týkajúce sa výučby dejepisu z hľadiska žiakov s poruchami učenia: 1. porozumenie obsahu učebných osnov, 2. užitočnosť obsahu učebných osnov, 3. užitočnosť učebných pomôcok. Údaje boli spracované pomocou softvéru SPSS s použitím deskriptívnej štatistiky a Chí-kvadrátového testu. 58,75 % učiteľov pochybuje, či ich žiaci s poruchami učenia pochopili obsah učebných osnov, ktorý sa vyučuje v rámci výučby dejepisu. 92,5 % učiteľov si myslí, že žiaci s poruchami učenia nebudú obsah predmetu dejepis využívať vo svojom ďalšom živote. Medzi učiteľmi panuje vysoká (viac ako 90 %) zhoda v otázke užitočnosti interaktívnych tabúl a vzdelávacích hier v kontexte výučby dejepisu žiakov s poruchami učenia.

Kľúčové slová: história, výučba, učenie, postihnutia.

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Introduction

The tradition of school-based transmission of historical knowledge in Hungary extends back several centuries. Although history emerged as an independent discipline only in the early modern period—primarily during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—historically oriented knowledge had already been present in education prior to this development. Among the early works produced explicitly for educational purposes and aiming to systematize historical content, the oeuvre of János Apáczai Csere (1955) is particularly noteworthy. His work addresses events, historical figures, and chronological data from the creation of the world up to the mid-seventeenth century. From the eighteenth century onward, the teaching of both universal and Hungarian history became widespread in school education; as a result, history may be regarded as one of the school subjects with the longest-established traditions. In current educational practice, the organizational and content-related framework of history teaching is regulated by the National Core Curriculum, the currently valid version of which is stipulated by Government Decree No. 5/2020 (I. 31.). More detailed regulations related to the core curriculum introduced in 2020 are provided by the framework curricula, which are adapted to the specific characteristics of different school types, stages of education, and subjects. This system of documents also pays particular attention to the education of students with special educational needs, including the development of specialized curricular guidelines for children with learning disabilities. The present study focuses on the methodological issues of history teaching for students with learning disabilities. This group of students includes children who “as a result of reduced functional efficiency of the nervous system attributable to biological and/or genetic factors, as well as adverse environmental influences, [they] exhibit persistent and pervasive learning difficulties and learning disorders” (Mesterházi, 1998, 54).

A smaller proportion of students with learning disabilities pursue their studies in schools operating under a special curriculum; however, a significant share of them participate in education within mainstream institutions in the framework of inclusive education (Jardinez & Natividad, 2024; Morocco, 2001). As students with learning disabilities belong to the category of students with special educational needs, the application of targeted and specifically selected pedagogical approaches is indispensable in their education in order to ensure optimal developmental outcomes (Nemes & Tahirák, 2023; Kertész & Mező, 2023; Hegedűs, 2023; Krausz, 2021). This level of methodological preparedness is particularly important in the teaching of history as a school subject, as its acquisition may pose one of the greatest challenges for students with learning disabilities (Mező, 2023). This is primarily attributable to delays in the domain of

cognitive functions, which hinder abstract thinking, the recognition of temporal relationships, and the interpretation of historical narratives. According to the literature, the cognitive activity of children with learning disabilities is characterized by pervasive impairments, which manifest in the functioning of perception, attention, and memory, as well as in deviations in thinking processes (Rottmayer, 2006; Orim et al., 2023). The underdevelopment of these functions substantially affects the effectiveness of history teaching, which relies on the recall of past events, the operation of imagination, and spatial and temporal orientation, thereby justifying the application of subject-specific and differentiated pedagogical methods. The teaching and learning of history among students with learning disabilities are constrained and shaped by a range of factors, necessitating the use of differentiated knowledge, pedagogical approaches, and instructional methods by history teachers and/or special education teachers responsible for history instruction.

The aim of this study is to identify and present the principal factors that hinder and influence the learning of history among students with learning disabilities, and analyses teachers' views regarding the effectiveness of history instruction and the efficiency of the methods employed in the teaching process in the cases of students with learning disabilities.

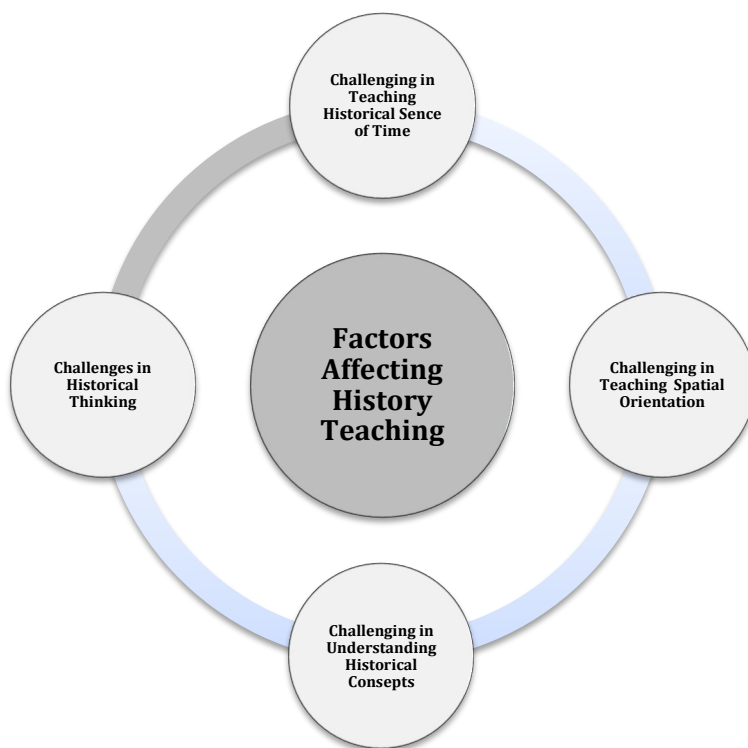
History Teaching for Students with Learning Disabilities

In Hungary, the 2020 revision of the National Core Curriculum introduced significant changes compared to the previous 2012 version, particularly in the restructuring of the "Human and Society" area of learning. Under the new regulations, this area was renamed "History and Civic Studies," encompassing three subjects: history, civic studies, and homeland and folk knowledge. The "History and Civic Studies" area of learning also becomes particularly prominent for students with learning disabilities at the upper primary level. In the preparation and implementation of teaching this subject, it is essential in every case that teachers take into account the students' individual pedagogical, special educational, and psychological characteristics. This approach ensures that the study of history is accessible, comprehensible, and developmentally supportive for children with learning disabilities. "Anyone who teaches history undertakes to professionally assist their students in the process of historical understanding. They direct their students' attention to the past and help them in acquiring and comprehending history, as well as in reconstructing and interpreting past events" (F. Dárdai, 2006, 66). The primary aim of school-based history education is to establish historical literacy, strengthen national identity, and foster a sense of belonging to both Europe and the global community. Traditionally, the curriculum

traces the events of Hungarian and world history from prehistory to the present day.

For students with learning disabilities, the objectives of history teaching are the same as for their peers: beyond acquiring knowledge of the past, the focus is on understanding the role and possibilities of social coexistence and community membership. Due to the complex nature of the subject, history plays a particularly important role in shaping values, complementing the effects of ethics education. History instruction should emphasize an objective and realistic understanding of the past, spatial and temporal orientation, the development of national identity awareness, and the exploration of causal relationships between events. At the same time, it is essential to take into account the learning difficulties of students with special educational needs, as these can significantly affect the effectiveness of the teaching process (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Factors Affecting History Teaching for Students with Learning Disabilities



(Source: own compilation)

Challenges in Developing Historical Sense of Time. The concept of time is fundamentally abstract, which poses particular challenges for students with learning disabilities, who often have limited capacities for abstract thinking. In history education, time does not merely refer to the apparent, sequential order of events but also requires understanding the relationships between events, which presupposes the ability to navigate abstract temporal frameworks. For students with learning disabilities, a more developed subjective sense of time and understanding of time in relation to themselves is typical. This means that students primarily perceive the world through their own experiences and personal memories, and are only able to interpret events temporally in relation to these experiences. Consequently, the development of orientation in historical time can only be effectively achieved through learning methods that build on experiential, hands-on activities and place these at the center of the learning process (Claravall & Irey, 2022; De La Paz, 2013). For students with learning disabilities, understanding historical time involves a range of specific difficulties, which manifest in the following areas: 1) Difficulties with Chronological Order: Recognizing and comprehending the temporal sequence of events often does not develop fully, and it cannot always be expected of these students. Understanding the relationships between events is challenging, which also hinders the comprehension of historical connections. 2) Problems with Memorizing Dates and Time Points: For students with learning disabilities, the goal is not the rote knowledge of specific years or periods, but the understanding of the meaning and significance of events. Mere repetition of dates as memorization is often an empty activity without meaningful content for them. 3) Difficulties with Periodization: Comprehending the division of historical events into chronological units and grouping them according to consistent principles is extremely challenging. Visualization is therefore crucial: timelines, color-coded diagrams, or parallel chronological layers can help convey temporal structures. 5) Difficulties with Synchrony: Understanding the relationships between simultaneous events (synchrony) presents challenges, as students struggle to interpret multiple events occurring within the same time frame simultaneously. 6) Problems with Diachrony: Examining concepts across different periods (diachrony) is also challenging, as tracking the temporal changes of events is difficult for students. 7) Occurrence of Anachronisms: Mistakes in placing events in their correct temporal context are frequent, which can distort the understanding of the logical relationships between historical events.

Challenges in Teaching Spatial Orientation, Difficulties in Conveying Historical Spatial Awareness. Similar challenges arise in teaching historical spatial awareness as in teaching temporal concepts. Instruction must take into account students' limited knowledge of spatial relationships and underdeveloped spatial

orientation skills. Many students with learning disabilities have struggled with spatial orientation difficulties since early childhood, which require ongoing special education support. Research on nonverbal learning disability (NVLD) demonstrates that children with significant visuospatial processing deficits show impairments in spatial reasoning, visuospatial working memory, and the ability to interpret spatial information such as maps, charts, and diagrams, which can impede their understanding of spatial aspects in academic subjects, including history (Mammarella & Cornoldi., 2020). In the context of history education, impairments in perceiving spatial relationships affect students' understanding of natural and geographical features, the use of essential instructional tools such as maps, blank maps, wall or hand-held maps, and the comprehension of the spatial location of events occurring within the same historical period. A common characteristic among students with learning disabilities is disorientation, which refers to a broad disruption of orientation and may simultaneously manifest in temporal, spatial, and personal dimensions.

Challenges in Understanding Historical Concepts. For students with learning disabilities, difficulties may arise not only in comprehending and grasping historical concepts but also in forming these concepts at all. Historical concepts always encapsulate human and social relationships—between individuals, between humans and nature, and within the social structures created by humans—situated in reciprocal historical contexts. The formation of concepts can present significant challenges in any subject, as the basic elements of a concept (its label and list of attributes) are not always explicitly established (see Mező, 2011; Mező, 2022 for further discussion). Concept formation is a complex process, and it requires particular attention when teaching students with learning disabilities. For instance, if terms such as Renaissance or Reformation are mentioned without explanation of their meanings the result is often mere parroting or rote memorization without any meaningful comprehension or functional use of the concepts.

Challenges in Historical Thinking. Historical thinking belongs to higher-order cognitive abilities, enabling individuals to flexibly adapt the knowledge they have acquired. "...the meaningful reception of historical knowledge also involves continuous interpretation and reconsideration. Developing such a reflective approach to history already requires complex cognitive skill development" (Kojanitz, 2014, 190). In students with learning disabilities, the development of historical thinking is hindered by impairments in cognitive functions. Due to the underdevelopment of basic functions, the emergence of higher-order, dependent functions cannot be expected. The following consequences must be taken into account: 1) Concrete Thinking: Students often exhibit literal thinking, with limited use of metaphors and difficulty understanding nuances. Their thinking tends to be

one-sided, and they are generally less capable of abstract reasoning. 2) Content Poverty: Their speech typically conveys very limited information. Their expressions are often characterized by emptiness, frequent repetition, imprecision, confused sentence structures, or lack of meaningful content. 4) Overvalued Ideas: Students may cling unreasonably to false beliefs that do not originate from their own thinking. They may identify with ideological frameworks that do not convey appropriate values, which necessitates careful consideration when presenting topics such as wars or historical leaders with despotic ideologies. In addition, students with learning disabilities often display heightened suggestibility, underdeveloped self-evaluation and self-awareness, and a tendency to conform to others' expectations. 5) Difficulties in Judgment Formation: These difficulties are often accompanied by challenges in reflective thinking and a lack of debating skills. Practicing rational, fact-based discussion should therefore be included among the tasks in history lessons.

It is evident that these difficulties greatly complicate the teaching of history's core content, as the very skills that support meaningful understanding and creative processing of historical knowledge are either absent or differently developed. Nevertheless, it is possible to achieve the true objective even with students with learning disabilities: fostering a genuine appreciation for history and cultivating interest and openness toward the subject. However, achieving this requires the use of specialized teaching methods.

Recommended Pedagogical Methods and Approaches for Teaching History to Students with Learning Disabilities

Among the most important characteristics of history didactics are source-centeredness, narrative-centeredness, and skills development, including both cognitive and competency-based growth. Of the numerous theories that have emerged over time and shaped history teaching, contemporary approaches are most strongly influenced by narrative-based learning and competency-based history education, which are also highly applicable for students with learning disabilities. Narrativity is a shared cognitive framework that endows events—or any stimuli affecting the human nervous system—with meaning. A narrative can depict real-world events or unfold in a fictional setting. Most narratives are stories, situated in time and space, whose characters are human; thus, a narrative is not merely a description but also an explanation. “A narrative describes and simultaneously explains” (Gyertyánfy, 2018). Accordingly, the teacher conveys knowledge to students enriched with human emotions, thoughts, and experiences. In history education, a narrative-centered approach encompasses both the possession of tellable stories about humanity's past—knowledge that the student has internalized—and an understanding of the nature and conventions of

historical storytelling (Brauch, 2015). This theory aligns well with the currently prevailing competency-based approach to history education in Hungary, which primarily emphasizes skills development. It is based on the premise that memorizing knowledge is not particularly worthwhile, as information quickly becomes outdated in today's fast-paced world or is easily accessible online. Instead, the focus is on the competencies required for acquiring knowledge. In the context of history education, these competencies include, in addition to the possession of knowledge and information, the development of cognitive skills, orientation abilities, historical thinking, the application of these skills in future contexts, and the cultivation of an open attitude toward history, among others (Claravall, E. B., & Irey, R, 2022).

In the history education of students with learning disabilities, six main groups of methods and approaches can be distinguished: 1) Oral Methods, 2) Written Sources, 3) Visual and Audiovisual Sources, 4) Material Artifacts, 5) Unwritten Intellectual Traditions and 6) Mixed Methods and Approaches, which emerge from the integrated use of the above methods.

Oral Methods. Oral methods are commonly employed in history teaching; however, it should be emphasized that, for students with learning disabilities, these methods are often less effective than other instructional approaches. The extent to which students grasp orally presented information depends on both the quantity and quality of the information delivered. Acquiring historical content requires allowing extended time for comprehension and retention. In history instruction, it is advisable to speak more slowly and use fewer words than usual, dedicating more time to rehearsal and practice. Oral methods include various forms of teacher-student communication, such as narration, description, explanation, group discussions, debates, and student presentations. Due to communication difficulties, these oral methods are more limited in their application than they are for peers without learning disabilities. The spoken word is generally a powerful teaching tool, but it is effective only when the teacher can ensure historical accuracy, chronological consistency, and a vivid, engaging narrative style. Effective use of oral methods requires the teacher to possess historical expertise, precision, and a charismatic delivery. For students with learning disabilities, particular attention must be paid to delivering information in short, clear sentences, breaking learning processes into small, manageable steps, and ensuring articulated and comprehensible speech. At the same time, efforts should be made to develop expressive language skills and to provide opportunities for intensive verbal interaction.

Written Sources. The use of written texts for students with learning disabilities typically involves textbooks prepared with reduced content. Written sources include historical texts and documents, some of which were intentionally

created for posterity, such as narrative sources—chronicles, gestas, annals, biographies, diaries, and similar works. Other sources emerged spontaneously through the activities of administrative, judicial, economic, military, ecclesiastical, or other institutions, such as charters, cadastral records, tithe registers, laws, decrees, court or council minutes, maps, plans, and epitaphs. Additionally, popular scholarly works and literary texts with historical themes also fall into this category. Students with learning disabilities are generally less inclined to read, and this should be taken into account during instruction. When selecting excerpts, the choice must align with curricular requirements as well as the students' age and cognitive abilities. During instruction, written texts are primarily presented in a teacher-read format, while independent student work is feasible only with short and easily comprehensible texts. During reading, it is essential to clarify key terms and concepts and check for understanding. For students who show interest in reading, materials such as popular history books, historical biographies, and historically themed literary works can be effectively utilized to enhance engagement and motivation.

Visual and Audiovisual Sources. As the old saying goes, "A picture is worth a thousand words." Visual sources are among the most effective methods for teaching history to students with learning disabilities, as visualization enables illustration, stimulates imagination, and supports the development of basic abstraction skills. Various types of visual and audiovisual sources can be employed, including: images, document-like illustrations, board drawings, sketches, mind maps, documentary-style films, presentations, and audiovisual tools. These resources allow students to engage with historical content in a concrete and tangible manner, enhancing comprehension and supporting memory retention. The use of visual and audiovisual sources is particularly beneficial for students who struggle with abstract thinking, as it provides multisensory input and allows the integration of visual and auditory learning channels, facilitating a more meaningful understanding of historical concepts and events. This category also includes audio recordings, such as vinyl records, CDs, and both online and offline music tracks. Historical performances, works by Hungarian poets and prose writers, memoirs, and documents can also be utilized in this context. Moving images are also included in this category: 1) Moving images may consist of historical films, personal videos, short films from the National Film Archive, or short clips of a few minutes. 2) Showing an entire film is generally not recommended for students with learning disabilities, as it may be too long and cognitively demanding. Carefully selected clips of 3–5 minutes can, however, make the lesson more engaging and appealing for students. Additionally, the numerous opportunities provided by the internet can be leveraged in history teaching. For instance, teachers can create digital teaching materials or make use of materials

prepared by others, thus enriching the learning experience and providing flexible, multimodal access to historical content. Various forms of digital teaching materials can be independently prepared to enrich and diversify classroom instruction. Examples include: analyzing source texts using a projector; examining visual sources via projection; viewing Wikipedia articles for informational purposes; displaying animated maps on a projector; watching short film clips followed by comprehension or review questions; conducting real-time information searches using smartphones; creating and presenting student-generated presentations with interactive verification tasks; writing imagined interviews or dialogues related to historical figures; projecting and completing self-made diagrams and tables; using historical comics to illustrate content; presenting animations that depict historical processes or phenomena etc. These methods allow students, including those with learning disabilities, to engage with historical content in multimodal, interactive, and visually supported ways, thereby enhancing comprehension, retention, and motivation.

Material artifacts. Material artifacts serve to help students understand their immediate and broader environment, fostering a sense of national identity and patriotism. These artifacts can be introduced or visited in a variety of forms during history lessons. Examples include buildings, structures, everyday objects, machinery, weapons, clothing, medals, awards, tools, burial sites, coats of arms, seals, coins, paintings, photographs, and more. Every material artifact has a history, and its educational use should involve placing it within an appropriate narrative and activating students' imagination. Authentic artifacts can be presented through museum visits, open-air museums (skanzens), or heritage/creative house excursions. When direct access to historical sites or objects is not possible, models or replicas can serve as effective substitutes. Such models convey the spatial and physical dimensions of historical artifacts and, because they are tangible, allow the engagement of multiple sensory modalities, enhancing students' experiential learning.

Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage. Intangible cultural heritage includes the folk tales and legends of Hungary and other nations, traditional songs, customs, folk costumes, proverbs, games, music, dance, linguistic heritage (archaic and regional dialects, geographical and personal names), traditions, behavioral norms, festivals, and life-situation enactments reflecting daily life. These forms of intangible cultural heritage can be incorporated into history lessons, especially when they are connected to a particular group or individual. They can also be intensively utilized within the framework of homeland and folk studies, providing rich, culturally grounded learning experiences.

Mixed Methods and Procedures. Of course, within the framework of lessons, individual methods and procedures do not exist in such strict separation; the

categorization is only meant to illustrate that history teaching should have long since moved beyond dull and uninteresting lesson content. The listed methods often appear in combination, for example, during projects, project weeks, historical adventure trips, or historical excursions. Occasionally, shorter or longer simulation games can also facilitate understanding. In these contexts, experience-based individual or group tasks play a particularly important role. Numerous excellent ideas for problem-oriented, experiential, and playful history teaching activities can be found in the works of József Kaposi, Ágnes F. Dárdai, and Miklós Száray (e.g., F. Dárdai, 2003, 2006; F. Dárdai & Kaposi, 2007; Kaposi, 2015, 2020; Kaposi & Száray, 2009).

In Hungary, the knowledge acquired by students with learning disabilities in history lessons does not fully correspond to that of their peers in mainstream schools (for details, see: Framework Curriculum for Students with Mild Intellectual Disabilities, Grades 5–8). This discrepancy can be partly attributed to the reduced curricular requirements and partly to the fact that history instruction for this student group is sometimes provided by special education teachers and sometimes by history teachers. The training of history teachers typically does not cover the specific characteristics, knowledge base, and methodological needs of students with learning disabilities, including those with mild intellectual disabilities; consequently, educational expectations often do not align with the individual abilities of the students. At the same time, the training of special education teachers provides significantly more limited theoretical and methodological knowledge of history teaching compared to history teachers, making the delivery of historical content uncertain for them as well. Due to the lack of methodological knowledge, teachers often perceive teaching history to students with learning disabilities as challenges. Therefore, it is justified to examine which factors contribute to the difficulties in the teaching process and which pedagogical and methodological solutions can support the success of the learning process.

Questions and Hypotheses

In connection with students with learning disabilities, this examination focuses on three main topics of teachers' opinions about the subject of history: 1. Understanding of curriculum content, 2. Usefulness of curriculum content, and 3. Usefulness of learning aids. The research questions and hypotheses are:

Question 1. What is the teachers' opinion about whether students with learning disabilities can understand the curriculum content of the subject History? *Hypothesis:* Teachers think that students with learning disabilities are less able to understand the curriculum content of the subject History.

Question 2. What is the teachers' opinion about content taught during history lessons can ever be utilized by students with learning disabilities in their later lives? Hypothesis: according to the teachers, the curriculum content of the subject History is less useful in the case of students with learning disabilities in their later lives.

Question 3. What is the teachers' opinion about the usefulness of learning aids such as textbooks, workbooks, interactive whiteboards, and educational games in the subject History for students with learning disabilities? Hypothesis: teachers can think that the above-referred learning aids applied in the subject History as useful for supporting the learning of students with learning disabilities.

Sample

Based on convenience sampling, $n = 80$ teachers who teach the subject of history to students in grades 5-8 in primary school participated in the study. Their sample characteristics are:

- Gender: the sample includes significantly (chi-square = 51,200; $df = 1$, $p < 0,001$) fewer males ($n = 8$) than females ($n = 72$). According to Varga (2024), the male-female ratio among teachers in Hungarian primary schools 15%:85%, which is close to 10 %:90 % male-female ratio of the present sample. But essential to highlight that neither Varga's data does not includes the number those teachers who teach the subject history to students with learning disabilities, nor closer database can not be found about these numbers. Consequently, the representativeness of the sample is unknown from the viewpoint of the genders.
- Age group: 22-29 ($n = 17$ persons), 30-39 ($n = 15$), 40-49 ($n = 22$), 50-59 ($n = 19$), and 60 or more ($n = 7$) years old teachers (according to the chi-square test, the differences are not significant among age groups). According to the database of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (KSH, 2025), the relative percentage distribution of the primary school teachers population across age groups is as follows: 22-29 years: 7.28 % (21.25 % in the present sample); 30-39 years: 13.82 % (18.75 % in the sample); 40-49 years: 28.05 % (27.50 % in the sample); 50-59 years: 34.13 % (23.75 % in the sample); and 60 years and above: 16.71 % (8.75 % in the sample). It is important to note that the actual number of teachers who teach the subject history to 5-8 grade students with learning disabilities is neither KSH (2025) nor other open database. Therefore, the representativeness of this sample is essentially unknown for the age groups.
- History teacher qualification: in the sample, $n = 27$ people had a history teacher qualification, $n = 53$ people did not (chi-square = 8,450; $df = 1$; p

< 0,001). Note: if this 33,75:66,25 percent rate is a good representation of the Hungarian situation, then two-thirds of teachers teach history without a history teacher qualification to students with learning disabilities. Unfortunately, data for the representativeness of this sample is also unknown regarding the aspects of history teacher qualification.

All things considered, although the sample representativeness is unconfirmed, the study provides valuable inputs for further examinations.

Methods

Data collection was conducted between 2024 and 2025 using an online questionnaire that included seven questions to be answered (possible answers: Yes or No). The first question was connected to hypothesis 1: "In your opinion, can the content taught during history lessons be understood by students with learning disabilities?"

The second question was necessary from the aspect of hypothesis 2: "In your opinion, can the contents taught during history lessons ever be utilized by students with learning disabilities in their later lives?"

The other questions were needed for testing Hypothesis 3:

- "In your opinion, are textbooks useful in teaching history to students with learning disabilities?"
- "In your opinion, are workbooks useful in teaching history to students with learning disabilities?"
- "In your opinion, are atlases/maps useful in teaching history to students with learning disabilities?"
- "In your opinion, are interactive boards useful in teaching history to students with learning disabilities?"
- "In your opinion, are educational games useful in teaching history to students with learning disabilities?"

Data analysis was performed using SPSS software, employing descriptive statistical methods and the Chi-square test. For counting effect size, Phi-coefficient and Cramér's V coefficient were applied.

Results

Table 1 summarizes the results of the chi-square tests. Although 58.8 % of the responding teachers believe that students with learning disabilities do not understand the content taught in history lessons, their percentile proportion does not differ significantly from that of their colleagues who disagree with them. A significantly ($p < 0,05$) higher proportion (92,5 %) of teachers thought that students with learning difficulties can not utilize the curriculum content taught

during history education in their later lives (Figure 2). The results indicate that there is strong agreement among more than 90 % of teachers regarding the effectiveness of using interactive whiteboards and games adapted to the curriculum. Their 65 % think that textbooks are useful in teaching history for student with learning disabilities, but their opinions are different in the case of the usefulness of workbooks, and atlases/maps.

Table 1 Results of the Chi-Square test in the cases of Hypotheses (N = 80)

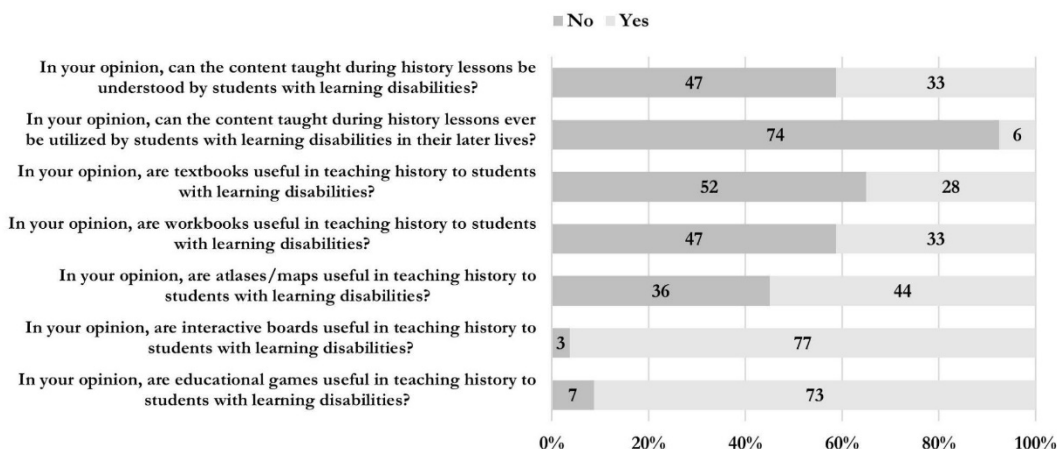
<i>Question</i>	<i>Possible values</i>	<i>Observed N (%)</i>	<i>Residual*</i>	<i>Chi-Square</i>	<i>Cramér's V (Effect size)</i>
In your opinion, can the content taught during history lessons be understood by students with learning disabilities?	No	47 (58,75%)	7	2,450	n.r.
	Yes	33 (41,25%)	-7		
In your opinion, can the content taught during history lessons ever be utilized by students with learning disabilities in their later lives?	No	74 (92,50%)	34	57,800*	0,85 (Very large effect)
	Yes	6 (7,50%)	-34		
In your opinion, are textbooks useful in teaching history to students with learning disabilities?	No	52 (65,00%)	12	7,200*	0,30 (Moderate effect size)
	Yes	28 35,00%)	-12		
In your opinion, are workbooks useful in teaching history to students with learning disabilities?	No	47 (58,75%)	7	2,450	n.r.
	Yes	33 (41,25%)	-7		
In your opinion, are atlases/maps useful in teaching history to students with learning disabilities?	No	36 (45,00%)	4	0,800	n.r.
	Yes	44 (55,00%)	-4		
In your opinion, are interactive boards useful in teaching history to students with learning disabilities?	No	3 (3,75%)	-37	68,450*	0,93 (Very large effect)
	Yes	77 (96,25%)	37		
In your opinion, are educational games useful in teaching history to students with learning disabilities?	No	7 (8,75%)	-33	54,450*	0,83 (Very large effect)
	Yes	73 (91,25%)	33		

(Source: own compilation)

Note: In all cases, 0 cells (0,0%) have expected frequencies less than 5; the minimum expected cell frequency is 40,0; df = 1

* The expected N=40; the expected N% = 50,00%; Residual = Observed N - Expected N

Figure 2 Frequency of "Yes" and "No" answers in the case of teachers' opinions in connection to students with learning disabilities in the case of the subject of history



(Source: own compilation)

In the cases of questions 1 and 2, significant differences are not between subsamples of gender, age group, and history teacher qualification.

The teachers' opinions about the usefulness of different learning aids (see question 3) show more variety. Subsamples of gender do not differ significantly from each other in their opinions about the usefulness of the textbook, atlas/maps, interactive board, and educational game. At the same time, workbooks are useful by 0% of males, but 54,2% of females (chi-squares = 6,241; df = 1; $p < 0,05$; but Phi = 0,279 refers only small effect size).

Subsamples of age groups do not differ significantly from each other in their opinions about the usefulness of the textbook, workbook, atlas/map. Although the interactive board is useful for every age group, 1 person from the 50–59 year old and 2 members from the 60+ years old age group thought that this tool is not useful for students with learning ability (chi-squares = 14,173; df = 4; $p < 0,05$; but Phi = 0,421 refers moderate effect size). According to most teachers, educational games are useful for teaching students with learning disabilities, but 1 teacher

from the 30–39 year olds, 2 people from the 50–59, and 4 people from the 60+ age group disagreed with it (chi-squares = 24,428; df = 4; $p < 0,01$; Phi = 0,553 refers large effect size).

Among the subsamples organized by the history teacher qualification, are no significant difference in connection to the opinions about the usefulness of the textbook, workbook, atlas/map, interactive board, and educational game.

Discussion and Conclusions

Based on the results, the next conclusions can be stated:

Understanding of curriculum content. There is no significant difference in the proportion of teachers' opinions in what they think about whether students with learning difficulties understand or do not understand the content of the history subject, so Hypothesis 1 was not confirmed. At the same time, it is noteworthy that more than half (58,75 %) of the teachers doubt whether their students with learning disabilities have understood the body of curricular knowledge communicated within history education. This proportion is too substantial to be disregarded. This result is consistent with Clark's (1997) earlier research findings, which indicate that teachers tend to make attributions regarding students with learning difficulties that imply lower levels of competence and reduced academic success—an interpretation that aligns with teachers' lower expectations (Kashiar et al., 2023). Whatever, the difference in opinion about the first question may be due to, for example: a) different characteristics of the students (given that the responding teachers did not form their opinions by teaching the same students), b) different characteristics of the teachers (e.g. teaching experience and/or methodological differences), c) teachers' topic selection preferences within the mandatory subject content may differ (e.g. they place emphasis on different topics during education, and thus they may have different experiences with students with learning disabilities), furthermore, self-report-based evaluations may be affected by d) teachers' affinity for the subject and their belief in the effectiveness of their own history-teaching practices. The absence of curriculum understanding represents a particularly critical factor in the learning of history of students with learning difficulties, which, among other things, results from that historical events and interrelations are inherently abstract and demand high-order cognitive processing and often prior knowledge. As of all this consequently, these students frequently encounter motivational challenges and low self-efficacy, further undermining learning outcomes and active classroom participation (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2018). Moreover, inadequate comprehension of the instructional material can exacerbate stress and anxiety, thereby impeding effective learning and contributing to long-term school disengagement (Cassady & Johnson, 2002; Pintrich & De Groot, 1990). Therefore, further research is needed to explore the

reasons for the difference in opinion and to explore the concurrent validity of teachers' opinions. This latter investigation can be carried out by exploring the historical knowledge of students with learning disabilities, and their characteristics indicative of understanding (e.g., through subject tests and content analysis). Furthermore, it is thought-provoking that if, in the opinion of teachers, it is really so random whether students with learning difficulties understand the content and context of history teaching, then it would be worthwhile to develop and teach them a more reduced curriculum.

Usefulness of curriculum content. The results confirmed hypothesis 2, i.e., teachers' opinions show a strong agreement that the "curriculum content of the subject History is less useful in the case of students with learning disabilities in their later lives." In the background of this teacher's opinion can be assumed, for example: a) the career possibilities of students with learning disabilities are far from those professions and jobs that require historical knowledge, so they will never use this knowledge after their school years; b) the historical knowledge is not necessary for their everyday life either. However, this question can be extended to a wider range of students, as it is not only in the case of students with learning disabilities that the question of whether they will use their history subject knowledge in their later lives may arise. The result in connection to the second question raises the need to modify the curriculum content for students with learning disabilities, if they must acquire usable and useful knowledge from the history subject, too.

Usefulness of learning aids. From the aspect of students with learning disabilities, the hypothesis related to the usefulness of learning aids in the history subject was partially confirmed. The results indicate that there is high agreement among teachers regarding the effectiveness of using interactive whiteboards and educational games adapted to the curriculum. They have moderate agreement about the usefulness of textbooks. Teachers' opinions are different in the case of the usefulness of workbooks, and atlases/maps. Note: likely, the large amount of curriculum content affects the feasibility of applying these methods. These findings also indicate that increasing emphasis is being placed on the use of modern digital tools and gamification in history education. The traditional textbook- and workbook-centered instructional approach is gradually being displaced, with interactive pedagogical practices assuming a more prominent role in classroom instruction (Lai & Hu, 2025).

The results point to the necessity of pedagogical innovation in the educational practices applied to students with learning difficulties. learning difficulties, it is imperative to not only critically reconceptualize, simplify, and contextualize curricular content, but also to strategically diversify and augment the repertoire of instructional modalities. The efficacy of learning support

interventions can be substantially enhanced through the deployment of targeted visual scaffolds, the systematic structuring of curricular materials, and the implementation of differentiated instructional strategies. Collectively, these evidence-based approaches have the potential to facilitate deeper comprehension of historical phenomena, mitigate anxiety associated with learning, and promote sustained academic engagement and long-term scholastic achievement (Friend & Bursuck, 2019).

Based on these results, a possible research topic may be testing with direct observations of the effectiveness of teaching students with learning disabilities.

Limitations

Among the limitations of the present study are the small sample size and the use of non-randomized and non-representative sampling; therefore, these issues should be addressed in future research. From a methodological viewpoint, it is necessary to test the concurrent validity of teachers' opinions by other methods (e.g., comparing the teacher's opinion about understanding with the measurement of the level of students' understanding).

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EXPERIENCES OF PARENTS RAISING CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS WITH ACCEPTING TEACHERS¹

Skúsenosti rodičov vychovávajúcich deti so špeciálnymi vzdelávacími potrebami s akceptujúcimi učiteľmi

Emese Balázs-Földi²

Abstract: *The main topic of our study is the preparedness and role of teachers in the integrated education of students with special educational needs. Our qualitative research focuses on the parents' perspective. We seek to answer the question of how well prepared schools and teachers are to receive and accommodate children with special educational needs, based on parental experience. Our study presents the partial results of our research on this topic.*

Keywords: *teacher attitudes, disability, integration.*

Abstrakt: *Hlavnou témou našej štúdie je pripravenosť a úloha učiteľov v integrovanom vzdelávaní žiakov so špeciálnymi vzdelávacími potrebami. Naše kvalitatívne výskumné zameranie sa sústreďuje na perspektívu rodičov. Snažíme sa odpovedať na otázku, ako dobre sú školy a učitelia pripravení prijímať a začleňovať deti so špeciálnymi vzdelávacími potrebami, a to na základe skúseností rodičov. Naša štúdia prezentuje čiastočné výsledky nášho výskumu v tejto oblasti.*

Kľúčové slová: *postoj učiteľov, zdravotné postihnutie, integrácia.*

Introduction

The number of children with special educational needs is constantly increasing, reaching around 110,000 in Hungary in the 2024/2025 school year. According to statistical sources, 9.2% of primary school pupils are students with special educational needs (Source: Central Statistical Office database). Seventy to seventy-five percent of children with special educational needs are educated in an integrated setting (Varga, 2022), which poses a significant challenge for the Hungarian school system and teachers. The issue of integrated education has been the focus of domestic research in recent decades, which primarily examines teachers' experiences with integration and the obstacles and difficulties of integrating students with special educational needs into schools. Our research focuses on parents who are raising children with special educational needs and whose children are learning in an integrated setting. Examining teachers' attitudes towards integration and children with special educational needs from

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the parents' perspective is justified because they represent the users of educational services, and by exploring their direct experiences, we can contribute to a broader exploration of the topic of integration.

In our study, we first present the concepts of special educational needs and integration from a Hungarian perspective, then we review the conditions for integration and the results of domestic research on the topic of integration. In the next section, we describe the purpose, characteristics, methodology, and directions of our research among parents of children with special educational needs, as well as the characteristics of the study sample. This is followed by a presentation of our research results and conclusions, and recommendations based on our findings.

Theoretical foundations

In Hungary, following the change of regime, the possibility of integrated education was introduced by Act LXXIX of 1993 on public education. We consider integrated school education to be when children with special educational needs are educated together with children without special educational needs in mainstream schools, both during lessons and other school programs. In Hungarian scientific terminology, in addition to the term "children with special educational needs," other terms are also used, sometimes as synonyms, to refer to those affected, such as children with disabilities, children with different developmental needs, or children with atypical development. Since "special educational needs" is a collective term that encompasses and covers the above-mentioned terms, we use the term "children or students with special educational needs" in our study.

Under Hungarian law, students with special educational needs are those who have physical, sensory (visual, auditory), intellectual, or speech impairments; multiple disabilities; or who have autism spectrum disorder or other psychological developmental disorders (severe learning, attention, or behavioral disorders) (Act CXC of 2011 on National Public Education, Section 4(25)). Children with special educational needs are entitled to special attention and treatment appropriate to their condition and abilities, including pedagogical, special educational and conductive educational care, during their institutional education and upbringing (Act CXC of 2011 on National Public Education, Section 4(13)). (13) of Act CXC of 2011 on National Public Education). Eligibility for special educational needs is determined by the Expert Committee for the Assessment of Learning Abilities of the Pedagogical Services. In addition to establishing a diagnosis, expert examinations make recommendations on the pedagogical methods to be applied, pedagogical concessions, exemptions from certain subjects, exemptions from parts of subjects, and the manner in which the

student's legal relationship is to be fulfilled, and designate, the educational institution to be attended, following consultation with the parents. The designated institution may be a special school, i.e., a school that accepts children with a specific type of disability, or an institution that accepts mainstream children and is able to provide integrated education in whole or in part. A mainstream school is entitled to provide for children with special educational needs if it is able to provide the additional pedagogical services necessary for the admission, integrated education, and development of students with special educational needs, as well as the pedagogical and special educational conditions, such as personnel and material infrastructure. In Hungary, integrated and segregated forms of education operate in parallel, and the population of students with genuine, severe disabilities continues to be segregated (Bánfalvy, 2008).

The primary goal of integration is to reduce the risk of social exclusion and to create social cohesion. The benefits of integrated education are evident in the lives of both students with special educational needs and the majority of students. Integrated education promotes equal treatment and equal opportunities for students with special educational needs, helps them learn and acquire social norms and values, expands their social skills and network of relationships through interactions with their peers, and strengthens their self-esteem and sense of competence. The integrated school environment also has a positive impact on mainstream students, as they can gain direct experience of working with children with special educational needs, which increases their social sensitivity, shapes their attitudes, increases their tolerance, and develops their social skills and empathy.

In Hungarian scientific discourse, the meaning of integration extends not only to students with special educational needs, but also to disadvantaged children, Roma and children with a migration background (Gicziné Fehér, 2024). In the language of Hungarian special education, integrated and inclusive education have different meanings. Integration primarily means assimilation, while inclusion means acceptance and is considered the highest level of integration. According to Réthyné (2002: 287), in the course of integrated education, *"mainstream schools accept children with special educational needs without making many changes to their pedagogical procedures, expecting them to integrate."* In the case of integration, students with special educational needs are expected to integrate, adapt, and perform at the same level as their peers.

Integrated education is successful when the school has the complex set of objective and subjective conditions necessary for co-education. Objective conditions include, among other things, the design of barrier-free buildings, the provision of special teaching aids, and lower class sizes in the classroom and school, while subjective, "soft" conditions include the attitude of classmates and

parents towards students with special educational needs, the cooperation between mainstream teachers and special education teachers, and the attitudes of teachers (kindergarten teachers, mainstream teachers, special education teachers) towards integration and students with special educational needs (Csányi, 2000; Papp, 2002; Horváthné Moldvay, 2006; Pásztor, 2023; Gizciné Fehér, 2024).

Based on research conducted in Hungary on integration and attitudes towards students with special educational needs, the following main conclusions can be drawn. The majority of special education teachers do not sympathize with integration because they do not consider mainstream teachers to be adequately prepared (Balázs – Bass, 2005). This is confirmed by research findings that show that the majority of inclusive teachers do not feel sufficiently prepared to teach children with special educational needs, as they believe that they lack both practical experience and methodological knowledge, and are therefore characterized by fear, uncertainty, and a lack of information (Horváthné Moldvay, 2006; Némethné Tóth, 2009; Szemereiné Szigethy, 2018). Inclusive teachers do not reject integration, but they are skeptical about its practical implementation (Fischer, 2009). Many lack the material and personnel conditions necessary for inclusive education (Fehér, 2020), while others lack further training opportunities (Némethné Tóth, 2009).

The school level also determines teachers' attitudes towards integration, with the highest level of acceptance among lower grade teachers and the highest level of rejection among secondary school teachers, with upper grade teachers showing a moderate level of acceptance (Némethné Tóth, 2009; Szabó, 2016). The most significant reason behind these negative attitudes is that integration places an additional burden on teachers, and therefore they are reluctant to teach in integrated classes (Szegő, 2008; Szabó, 2016, Tóth-Szerecz, 2023), and the number of students in the class is also a determining factor (Vida, 2022). Integration is not rejected across the board, but attitudes are also influenced by the type and severity of the disability (Horváthné Moldvay, 2006; Fischer, 2009). Research results also indicate that experiences with students with special educational needs, teaching practice gained in integrated education, and theoretical knowledge acquired on the subject have a positive effect on teachers' attitudes towards integration (Szegő, 2008; Némethné Tóth, 2009; Fischer, 2009; Pető, & Ceglédi, 2012; Szekeres, 2012; Szabó, 2016). Teachers' attitudes are determined by their place of residence, with those living in smaller settlements showing a higher level of acceptance towards children with special educational needs (Fischer, 2009).

Based on the Hungarian research results presented, it can be concluded that, according to teachers, the personality of the inclusive teacher is a key factor in the

successful integration of students with special educational needs into schools. The main feature of the above studies is that they examine the issue of educational integration from the perspective of teachers, while the experiences of parents in this regard are missing from the research results. Our present study attempts to fill this gap.

Methodology

We conducted our empirical research among parents raising children with special educational needs. The aim of the research was to learn about the experiences of parents raising children with special educational needs in an integrated setting. In this study, we summarize the partial results of the parents' experiences with teachers. We formulated the following research questions. How do parents of students with special educational needs assess the preparedness of inclusive teachers? How do teachers relate to the special needs of children with special educational needs? Do they receive help, and if so, what kind of help do they receive from teachers during the school studies of students with special educational needs? Did they perceive any differences in the preparedness of teachers based on school levels?

Our study is exploratory in nature, so we chose a qualitative method. Semi-structured interviews provide an opportunity to explore opinions and attitudes, as well as the emotions behind them, in greater depth. The interview questionnaire consists of three topics and contains 67 questions. One section of the questionnaire explores experiences related to school, teachers, parents, and classmates. This study presents the results regarding teachers.

The research was conducted between November and December 2025. When selecting the sample, we sought to include parents whose children have special educational needs and are enrolled in school, and who are between the ages of 10 and 25, as we believe that these parents already have sufficient experience with the education system through their children's school careers. Since the members of the target group are difficult to identify and we did not want to reach the parents through educational institutions, sampling was done using the snowball method, which means that we involved additional participants in our research based on the recommendations of one or two parents. A disadvantage of sampling is the possibility of bias, as the social network of the participants does not represent the entire statistical population.

The current sample size is 8 ($n = 8$). All of the parents participating in the study are mothers, which is likely due to the fact that in Hungary, mothers play a stronger role in raising children and maintain contact with schools and teachers. The mothers participating in the study are between the ages of 39 and 53, and all of them are married to the fathers of their children with special educational needs.

With the exception of one respondent, all of them have a higher education degree and work in addition to raising their children. All of the respondents live in one county, with two families living in small towns and six families living in large cities. The children with special educational needs are between the ages of 10 and 23, with six boys and two girls. The children's special educational needs are based on a variety of diagnoses: three with autism spectrum disorder, one with visual disability, one with hearing disability, one with hearing disability and developmental disorder, one with mobility disability, and one with learning disabilities (dyslexia and dysgraphia). The main sociodemographic characteristics of the interviewees are summarized in Table 1 (Table 1).

Table 1 Sociodemographic characteristics of interviewees (n = 8)

Interviewee					Data on children with SEN		
Code	Age	Educational qualifications	Employment	Type of residence	Gender	Age	Diagnosis
1.	47	higher education degree	employed	city	male	17	autism spectrum disorder
2.	43	higher education degree	employed	city	male	13	visual disability
3.	49	higher education degree	employed	village	female	23	hearing disability
4.	51	basic education	unemployed	village	male	13	autism spectrum disorder
5.	45	higher education degree	employed	city	male	16	learning disability (dyslexia, dysgraphia)
6.	48	higher education degree	employed	city	female	16	hearing disability and developmental disorder
7.	39	higher education degree	employed	city	male	10	mobility disability
8.	53	higher education degree	employed	city	male	16	autism spectrum disorder

(Source: own research)

Due to the sampling, the number of samples, and the sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents, the research is not representative. In order to ensure the anonymity of the members of the sample, the interviewees were identified by numbers. With the consent of the respondents, we made audio recordings of the interviews and then transcribed the text. We read through the recorded responses several times and organized them into thematic units. In our

study, we support our analyses with quotes from the interview transcripts that best capture the respondents' opinions.

Results

According to our research results, the parents surveyed had similar opinions about the preparedness of teachers as those found in previous studies. Five out of eight parents (1, 2, 3, 4, 8) responded that teachers were not professionally prepared to accept children with special educational needs. Several parents (1, 2, 3, 4) said that teachers were terrified of how to teach and deal with students with special educational needs in their class. Two parents (4, 8) had the experience that teachers wanted to get rid of the child because of perceived or real burdens, so their attitude was clearly dismissive and negative. *"He didn't want to deal with him, I had the feeling that he wanted to get rid of him, especially when it turned out that he was autistic."* (4)

In addition to the attitude of teachers, parents also mentioned their lack of methodological preparation; they had neither theoretical knowledge nor practical experience of the special learning needs of the given type of disability. One parent (2) emphasized that teachers did not even make an effort to learn more and rejected the offered training opportunities. *"They would not attend a professional training course held by a typhlopedagogical consultant from Pest to learn more. We have discussed several times that I should persuade the principal and the teaching staff to spare an hour and a half for them, and they have put together a sensitivity training program for them, but they are not taking advantage of it."* (2) This parent also complained that the teachers do not share information with each other about the child's needs, or they only share the diagnosis, which does not help them to apply special solutions. *"They don't know what his needs are, what kind of support he needs and how, they don't share information with each other. (...) I can see that the teachers don't share information with each other. They don't read this 5-page expert opinion, the teachers don't know about it."* (2)

However, the exchange of information among teachers can also reinforce negative attitudes. Teaching staff may develop a negative image of students with special educational needs in advance, as teachers often discuss only the difficulties and problems associated with the student among themselves, which reinforces stereotypes about special educational needs. *"The physics teacher came up to me in the hallway and told me that he was so afraid that M. was autistic, precisely because he had heard in the staff room that the child was autistic, but he was so pleasantly surprised that he found working with him very successful."* (4)

According to three parents (5, 6, 7) who did not question the teachers' preparedness, there was no resistance or difficulty in relation to their child's special educational needs, as their child's disability did not have a negative impact on their learning ability and therefore did not place an additional burden on the teachers. In addition, one parent (5) believed that their positive attitude was

helped by the fact that they had a collegial relationship with their child's teachers and consulted with them on a daily basis.

Seven out of eight parents (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7) emphasize that despite their lack of professional training, the teachers tried to resolve the situation in a positive manner and demonstrated "tolerance" (1), "goodwill" (2), "openness" (7), "helpfulness" (1, 3, 4, 5), and "flexibility" (6, 7). Parents unanimously agreed that the most difficult period was the initial period, when teachers were unfamiliar with both the child and his or her problems. Therefore, the initial period was characterized by rejection, but later experiences with the child led to positive changes in attitudes. In the case of parent (8), the positive change was facilitated by a change of teacher, as the parent was in constant confrontation with the previous teacher.

One respondent (3) mentioned a lack of flexibility, as the teacher objected to the child's participation in developmental classes because they took place during school hours. The helpfulness of the teachers was justified by the fact that, on the one hand, the teachers paid special attention to the student during lessons and, on the other hand, they worked separately with the child outside of lessons to help him prepare. *"They tried to support him according to his abilities, e.g. when they wrote a test, they knew he would not be able to write it all at once, so they had him write the other half the next day and graded it that way."* (1) *"Teachers paid more attention to Zs., so they treated him as special. (...) In elementary school, his Hungarian and math teachers spent one hour each afternoon with him so that if Zs. fell behind in class, they could help him catch up."* (3) This parent emphasized that his son was able to participate in the school trip because the homeroom teacher and one of the subject teachers paid special attention to the student and convinced the parent that they would give his child all the help he needed.

Several parents (1, 3, 4, 6, 8) mentioned that teachers have so many tasks and responsibilities that their negative attitude is understandable. In their opinion, large class sizes and the presence of children with special educational needs in the classroom are a burden, preventing teachers from giving the children the attention they need. *"In a large class, children can get lost more easily."* (3) *"There were 24 children in the class. He (the class teacher) didn't want to deal with him."* (4) *"I could see that it was very difficult for them because when there was a child with behavioral problems, they tried to cope."* (6) Parents clearly mentioned small classes as an advantage, as teachers are less overburdened and can therefore devote more attention and time to students with special educational needs. Individual attention and care were particularly highlighted by parents living in rural areas (3, 4), as in their case the number of students in both the school and the class was lower than that of students studying in the city. *"They were able to devote time to him because of the small class size, and it was easier for*

them to see that he needed help. In a large class, a child can get lost more easily. He always sat at the front, and there was eye contact." (3)

The parents in our sample had different experiences, depending on the grade level, regarding teachers' attitudes toward children with special educational needs. In lower elementary school, children receive more care, attention, individual attention, and help, even if the relationship between parents and teachers was not free of conflict and tension (1, 2, 8). *"Primary school teachers (teachers) saw when he needed time and were patient. For example, they saw that he was no longer paying attention, so they gave him his drawing book, which he worked on for about 5 minutes, then returned to his studies and continued from there."* (1) In upper grades, there are no longer homeroom teachers, and subject teachers spend less time with the class, so they know the students less well and provide them with less individual support. Students receive the least individual attention during their high school studies. Several parents responded that they did not require this, as they were satisfied with the teachers at the school and their children enjoyed being there. It was characteristic of parents of students attending high school or university (1, 3, 4, 5, 8) were calmer and more composed in their responses, probably because their children were nearing the end of their school career and they had accepted the limitations of their children's abilities, and because they already had more experience with the school system and therefore did not have high expectations of teachers. Two parents (1, 8) stated with some bitterness in their voices that their only desire was to get it over with. There are also differences between rural and urban areas in terms of secondary schools, as teachers provided more support to students attending rural high schools (3) than to those attending urban high schools.

There are also differences in parental experiences depending on the nature and type of the students' disabilities. The parents (3, 5, 6, 7) were most satisfied with the teachers where there was the least need to apply special methodological solutions in relation to their child's learning ability or behavior, and where the child easily integrated with their classmates, i.e., did not cause a significant additional burden on the teachers. The most negative experiences were reported by parents of students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder and visual impairment (1, 2, 4, 8).

Discussion

By analyzing the interview transcripts, we were able to identify the main problems experienced by parents of children with special educational needs who participated in the study in relation to teachers. Due to the specific nature of the sampling and the small sample size, our research cannot be considered generally valid or representative, but it does indicate trends and may point to directions for

further research.

We can formulate the following answers to our research questions. According to our research results, parents of students with special educational needs do not consider inclusive teachers to be prepared for integration, which is consistent with the results of previous studies exploring teachers' opinions (Szemereiné Szigethy, 2018; Némethné Tóth, 2009; Horváthné Moldvay, 2006). Parental experiences confirm that teachers do not have sufficient theoretical or practical competence in relation to children with special educational needs, and therefore typically respond to these students with fear, alarm, and rejection. However, they are reluctant to participate in further training or consultations, and there is a lack of regular consultation and information exchange within the teaching staff.

The results of previous studies (Szegő, 2008; Némethné Tóth, 2009; Fischer, 2009; Pető & Ceglédi, 2012; Szekeres, 2012; Szabó, 2016) are supported by the responses of our interviewees, who say that practical experience leads to a change in teachers' attitudes. Thanks to positive experiences with students, teachers' initial uncertainty is mostly replaced by helpfulness and a supportive attitude, meaning that despite their methodological shortcomings, most teachers treat children with special educational needs humanely.

The positive attitude of teachers is supported by the fact that the majority of students with special educational needs receive extra attention and support from their teachers both during and outside of class so that they do not fall behind with the curriculum and can participate in school programs. There may be differences between grade levels and types of settlements. The supportive attitude is particularly characteristic of teachers in primary school and lower grades of primary school, and as the grade level progresses, the individual care and support provided by teachers to students with special educational needs decreases. The only exception to this was among students attending rural schools. According to parents' experiences, students with special educational needs received the least support in secondary schools.

Our research findings indicate that, similar to the conclusions of Szegő (2008), Szabó (2016), and Tóth-Szerecz (2023), parents explain their rejection of integration by pointing to the additional workload placed on teachers. In this context, the importance of class size arises, which determines the workload of teachers and limits their opportunities to participate in further training and consultations, as well as the amount of time they can devote to students. Further research is needed to confirm our findings that teachers in rural areas have more opportunities to devote extra time to supporting the schooling of children with special educational needs. It is likely that teachers in rural schools are in a more favorable position in this regard due to the declining population and number of

children.

Similar to the findings of Horváthné Moldvay (2006) and Fischer (2009), our research results indicate that the type and severity of disability are also decisive factors in teachers' attitudes toward the integrated education of students with special educational needs. The more severe the student's disability, the less acceptance they show, presumably also due to a lack of competence and additional burdens.

Conclusion

Overall, based on our research findings, it can be concluded that, according to parents' experiences, the educational integration of children with special educational needs can still only be achieved at considerable difficulty. In order to bring about change, it would be necessary for teachers to acquire theoretical and practical competencies related to special educational needs during both their higher education and subsequent continuing education. In order to get to know the students, it would be advisable to establish personal contact between teachers and families through home visits before the start of school. This would also facilitate the transition between different school levels. In order to facilitate the transition, it would be necessary to establish cooperation between teachers at different school levels, during which teachers could gather preliminary information about children with special educational needs.

In view of the workload of teachers and the growing number of children with special educational needs, it is recommended that class sizes be limited to around 20 pupils. This would enable teachers to reduce their additional workload and help their pupils with greater professional and methodological preparedness.

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Section 4:

HIGHER EDUCATION SOLUTIONS FOR BUILDING AN INCLUSIVE SOCIETY IN POLAND

STRUCTURES OF UNCERTAINTY AS AN ANALYTICAL CONCEPT IN COMPARATIVE RESEARCH ON INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE¹

Štruktúry neistoty ako analytický koncept v porovnávacom výskume inkluzívneho vzdelávania v krajinách strednej a východnej Európe

Dorota Prysak²

Abstract: Contemporary social reality is characterized by a high level of variability, fluidity, and uncertainty, which significantly impacts the functioning of educational systems. The pace and scope of ongoing transformations mean that educational institutions increasingly operate under conditions of limited predictability, adaptive pressure, and tensions between institutional stability and the need to implement change. In this context, inclusive education becomes not only an organizational and pedagogical challenge but also a source of strong social emotions, such as fear, uncertainty, and resistance to change. This article concerns the international research project "Structures of Uncertainty: Inclusive Education in Central and Eastern European Countries," implemented between 2024 and 2027. The main coordinator of the Visegrad Project is the University of Silesia in Katowice, in collaboration with three international partners: the University of Prešov in Slovakia, the University of Debrecen in Hungary, and Ambis University in the Czech Republic. The project aims to conduct a comparative analysis of the uncertainty structures surrounding the implementation of inclusive education and to strengthen the role of international cooperation in promoting the concept of inclusion in Central and Eastern European countries. The project is based on the premise that direct collaboration between teachers, researchers, educational policymakers, and representatives of civil society fosters trust, reduces institutional uncertainty, and deepens understanding of the principles of inclusive education. The results obtained are intended to contribute to the formulation of more coherent and stable systemic solutions for inclusive education in the Central and Eastern European region.

Key words: inclusive education, structures of uncertainty, countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

Abstrakt: Súčasná spoločenská realita sa vyznačuje vysokou mierou variability, nestálosťou a neistotou, čo výrazne ovplyvňuje fungovanie vzdelávacích systémov. Tempo a rozsah prebiehajúcich transformácií znamenajú, že vzdelávacie inštitúcie čoraz viac fungujú v podmienkach obmedzenej predvídateľnosti, adaptačného tlaku a napätia medzi inštitucionálnou stabilitou a potrebou zavádzať zmeny. V tomto kontexte sa inkluzívne vzdelávanie stáva nielen organizačnou a pedagogickou výzvou, ale aj zdrojom silných spoločenských emócií, ako sú strach, neistota a odpor voči zmenám. Tento článok sa týka medzinárodného výskumného projektu „Štruktúry neistoty: inkluzívne vzdelávanie v krajinách strednej a východnej Európy,“ ktorý sa realizuje v rokoch 2024 až 2027. Hlavným koordinátorom visegrádkeho projektu je Sliezska univerzita v Katowiciach v spolupráci s tromi medzinárodnými partnermi: Prešovskou univerzitou v Prešove na Slovensku, Univerzitou v Debrecíne v Maďarsku a Ambis univerzitou v Českej republike. Cieľom projektu je vykonať komparatívnu analýzu štruktúr neistoty súvisiacich s implementáciou inkluzívneho vzdelávania a posilniť úlohu medzinárodnej spolupráce pri propagácii konceptu inklúzie v krajinách strednej a východnej Európy. Projekt vychádza z predpokladu, že priama spolupráca medzi učiteľmi, výskumníkmi, tvorcami vzdelávacích politík a zástupcami občianskej spoločnosti posilňuje dôveru, znižuje inštitucionálnu neistotu a prehľbuje pochopenie princípov

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inkluzívneho vzdelávania. Získané výsledky majú prispieť k formulovaniu koherentnejších a stabilnejších systémových riešení pre inkluzívne vzdelávanie v regióne strednej a východnej Európy.

Kľúčové slová: inkluzívne vzdelávanie, štruktúry neistoty, krajiny strednej a východnej Európy.

Introduction

Contemporary education systems operate in conditions of increasing variability, complexity, and uncertainty resulting from dynamic social, cultural, political, and economic changes. Globalization, intensifying mobility, the development of multi-level public governance, and the pressure of international educational standards mean that schools and educational institutions increasingly operate in conditions of limited predictability and permanent adaptation. Education is no longer an area of stable normative frameworks, but rather a field of negotiation, tension, and conflicting expectations formulated towards various actors in the system.

In this context, inclusive education is particularly important; in recent decades, it has become one of the key directions of educational reforms in Europe. Promoted as an expression of the realization of human rights, social justice, and equal opportunities, inclusive education assumes a shift from segregated models of education towards the common education of all students in mainstream schools. At the same time, however, its implementation reveals numerous tensions between the normative assumptions of educational policies and the real capabilities of school systems, especially in Central and Eastern European countries. This region is characterized by a specific historical and institutional context, linked to the experience of political transformation, reforming the welfare state, and restructuring educational systems. These processes were often fragmented and inconsistent, fostering persistent areas of ambiguity regarding institutional roles, responsibilities, and support mechanisms. As a result, inclusive education is sometimes implemented in conditions of incomplete systemic readiness, limited resources, and conflicting interpretations of reform goals.

This article contributes to this research stream by analyzing inclusive education from the perspective of "structures of uncertainty." This concept enables us to identify persistent, systemic sources of ambiguity that are not solely the result of temporary implementation difficulties, but rather a fundamental aspect of contemporary education systems' functioning. Structures of uncertainty manifest themselves in various ways, including the instability of legal regulations, discrepancies between policy and practice in schools, teacher responsibility overload, and the coexistence of segregation and inclusion models. This article aims to demonstrate how structures of uncertainty shape the implementation of inclusive education in Central and Eastern European countries, with particular emphasis on a comparative perspective. The analysis is based on the assumption

that comparative research allows not only the identification of similarities and differences between educational systems but also a better understanding of the institutional and cultural mechanisms that determine their functioning. Adopting this perspective allows for avoiding simplistic assessments of educational reforms and fosters the formulation of more relevant conclusions regarding the possibilities and limitations of inclusive education in the region.

Theoretical Foundations

The Category of Uncertainty – Definitions and Theoretical Approaches

The category of uncertainty is one of the key analytical concepts used in contemporary social and educational research. It is multidimensional, encompassing social, institutional, and epistemological dimensions, making it particularly useful in analyses of inclusive education. It allows for the capture of tensions between the level of public policy, the functioning of educational institutions, and everyday school practice.

Uncertainty is sometimes viewed as an inherent feature of late modernity, resulting from the dynamics of social, institutional, and cultural change. It denotes a state in which both individuals and institutions lack a stable frame of reference enabling them to predict the consequences of their actions. In this sense, uncertainty is not a temporary phenomenon, but a permanent element of contemporary social orders. Zygmunt Bauman associates it with the fluidity of social structures, the weakening of enduring norms, and the erosion of institutional guarantees of security, leading to a growing sense of instability and ambivalence (Bauman, 2006). In sociological terms, the category of uncertainty is often analyzed in close connection with the concept of risk. Ulrich Beck points out that threats characteristic of modern societies are generated by the very systems intended to ensure security and order, and uncertainty becomes a side effect of institutional development and a structural feature of its functioning (Beck, 2002). This approach is complemented by an epistemological perspective, in which uncertainty refers to cognitive limitations, lack of knowledge, contradictory information, and the inability to unambiguously interpret reality. This perspective concerns situations in which social actors are unable to determine either the probability of events or their consequences, as classically described by Knight (1921) and Giddens (2008).

A specific dimension of the analyzed category is institutional uncertainty, which refers to the instability of rules, procedures, and social roles, especially in public sectors such as education. It refers to a situation in which formal institutions fail to provide a clear, coherent, and predictable framework for action. In educational systems, this manifests itself in frequent legislative changes,

inconsistencies in public policies, and discrepancies between formal regulations and their implementation in practice (North, 1990; March & Olsen, 2006).

In pedagogy and the sociology of education, uncertainty particularly concerns teachers' roles, assessment criteria, school responsibilities, and ways of responding to diverse student needs. In inclusive education, it often takes on a structural nature when the educational system fails to provide sufficient resources, stable support models, or clear guidelines for pedagogical practice (Biesta, 2013; Florian, 2014). In this context, the concept of "structures of uncertainty" refers to persistent institutional and cultural arrangements that reproduce role ambiguity, shift responsibility to individual actors, and perpetuate a state of provisionality. This category proves particularly useful in analyzing the education systems of post-transition countries, where reforms are often fragmented and inconsistent (Sztompka, 2005; Misztal, 2001).

Analyzing uncertainty in inclusive education requires simultaneously addressing its normative and theoretical foundations. Inclusive education is understood as a model for organizing the educational process, the goal of which is to enable all students—regardless of ability, social, cultural, linguistic, or health background—to learn together in mainstream schools, while providing adequate support. It is not a compensatory strategy, but a systemic approach that redefines the goals, structure, and practice of education (Ainscow, 2005; Florian, 2014). It is based on the assumption of equal dignity for all persons, the recognition of diversity as the norm, and a humanistic and personalistic conception of the human person (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 2009). In this sense, inclusive education is treated as a human right, not merely good pedagogical practice.

A significant theoretical foundation for inclusion is the social model of disability, according to which students' difficulties stem primarily from systemic barriers, and the responsibility for addressing them rests with educational institutions, not the individual. This model opposes medical and deficit approaches that focus on "fixing" students rather than modifying the educational environment (Oliver, 1996; Shakespeare, 2014).

The concept of "structures of uncertainty" is not a clearly codified term in classical pedagogical theories, but rather originates from late modern sociology, institutional theories, and public policy research. In education research, it is used to describe persistent, systemic sources of ambiguity that influence the decisions of educational actors – the state, local governments, schools, teachers, and parents – limiting the predictability of actions and the effects of reforms. In this sense, structures of uncertainty do not imply chaos, but rather stable patterns of instability inherent in the functioning of educational systems.

The sociological foundations of this approach can be found in the theories of Beck and Giddens, who argue that contemporary institutions operate in

conditions of permanent change, risk, and reflexivity, and that uncertainty becomes a structural feature of social systems, not merely a temporary state (Beck, 2005; Giddens, 1991). In education, this translates into the constant redefinition of reforms, regulations, and support models, which hinders their stable implementation.

In public policy research, uncertainty is also analyzed as a result of multi-level governance, inconsistent political goals, and international and national pressures. As Ball (2012) notes, educational policy functions simultaneously as a normative discourse and local practice, generating a persistent implementation gap between reform assumptions and their implementation. In inclusive education, structures of uncertainty are revealed in the tension between the ideals of equity and inclusion and the actual capabilities of school systems.

Comparative studies conducted in Europe indicate that inclusion is sometimes implemented in conditions of incomplete institutional readiness, which favors the emergence of hybrid or illusory solutions (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2018). Frequent legislative changes lead to discontinuity in inclusive policies and hinder the planning of long-term support for students with special educational needs. In such cases, reform becomes permanent, not temporary (Beck, 2005). Declarative provisions about inclusion are not always reflected in everyday school practice, and teachers and principals operate under conflicting expectations, pursuing inclusive ideals while lacking resources (Ball, 2012).

The ambiguity of diagnostic criteria, varying interpretations of regulations at the local level, and insufficient preparation for working in classrooms with diverse educational needs reinforce systemic selective mechanisms and generate professional uncertainty among teachers, leading to strategies of avoidance, delegating responsibility, or returning to segregationist solutions (Ainscow, 2005). In many education systems, segregation and inclusion models coexist, creating a structural ambivalence that constitutes one of the key structures of uncertainty in inclusion policies.

Using the category of "structures of uncertainty" therefore enables the analysis not only of formal systemic solutions but also of their enduring limitations, the comparison of educational systems without simplistic hierarchies, and the identification of mechanisms hindering the effective implementation of inclusive education in different national contexts.

Methodology

Comparative research is a well-established theoretical and methodological approach in the social sciences, including pedagogy, the sociology of education, and public policy research. Its essence is the systematic comparison of social phenomena operating in different yet comparable contexts, while maintaining a common analytical axis (*tertium comparationis*). The goal of comparison is not solely to identify similarities and differences, but primarily to explain the mechanisms that produce these differences and the institutional and cultural conditions in which given solutions operate.

In comparative pedagogy, comparative research is one of the fundamental methodological strategies used in the analysis of educational systems and policies. The classic approach to comparative research, proposed by Bereday (1964), comprises four stages: description, interpretation, comparison, and comparison proper, enabling a transition from empirical analysis to theoretical generalization. Contemporary comparative research, however, is moving away from simple models of transferring solutions between countries, emphasizing the importance of social, cultural, and historical context and pointing to the limitations of ahistorical and normative comparisons (Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2014). The methodology adopted in this article aligns with critical comparative pedagogy, treating educational systems as constructs embedded in specific institutional traditions, political conditions, and transformational experiences.

The analysis focuses on Central and Eastern European countries, which share a common experience of systemic transformation while simultaneously diversifying their educational reform trajectories, including the implementation of inclusive education. The research is being conducted as part of the Visegrad cooperation, supported by the International Visegrad Fund, which has been financing scientific, educational, and social initiatives in the Visegrad Group countries since 2000. This fund supports the development of regional cooperation, the exchange of experiences, and the search for common solutions to the challenges facing Central Europe, with particular emphasis on education, social cohesion, and public policies (International Visegrad Fund, 2023).

The main goal of the research is to identify similarities and differences in approaches to inclusive education in the Visegrad Group countries, analyze the mechanisms that generate systemic uncertainty, and assess the degree of implementation of international educational standards, including recommendations from the European Union and the United Nations. The research also aims to determine the local cultural, political, and institutional conditions that influence the practical implementation of inclusive education. In Visegrad studies, inclusive education is analyzed as an area particularly susceptible to the occurrence of so-called uncertainty structures, understood as persistent, systemic

sources of ambiguity accompanying the implementation of educational reforms. These include institutional barriers, such as the instability of legal regulations, inconsistency of public policies, and multi-level governance of education, as well as cultural and organizational factors influencing everyday school practice. As Ball (2012) points out, educational policy functions simultaneously as a normative discourse and local practice, generating a persistent implementation gap between reform assumptions and their implementation.

Using a comparative approach allows for the identification of common problem patterns across Central and Eastern Europe, as well as specific national solutions, without a simplistic hierarchy of education systems. The common historical and institutional context of the Visegrad Group countries facilitates in-depth regional analyses, allowing for a better understanding of the dynamics of implementing inclusive education in conditions of transformation and permanent change (Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2014).

The project team is composed of representatives of universities from countries participating in cooperation under the International Visegrad Fund, carrying out joint research activities in the field of integrated and inclusive education. The project is based on international cooperation based on the shared historical, institutional, and cultural experiences of the Visegrad Group countries, including Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary.

The project partners operate in a reality known as a period of "suspension" or transition between the industrial and information ages, characterized by high levels of volatility, uncertainty, and a crisis of trust in expert and institutional knowledge. The effects of these processes are visible in many areas of social life, but are particularly acute in education, which is increasingly forced to respond to dynamic social, technological, and cultural changes. In this context, integrated and inclusive education is becoming a field of intense tensions, expectations, and debates regarding the role of schools and the professionalism of teachers.

In the V4 countries, education systems for students with disabilities and other special educational needs have developed under similar historical conditions, often based on segregation or selection models. Transforming these systems towards inclusive education requires long-term efforts and the active involvement of teachers as key actors of change. This process is time-consuming and complex, and its success depends largely on the degree of preparation of teachers to work in conditions of constant change and uncertainty.

The aim of the comparative analysis conducted in the project is to demonstrate the conditions, tasks, and challenges facing contemporary education systems, in which professionally trained teachers play a central role. The study assumes that each teacher constructs their own social world, the shape of which is determined by institutional constraints on their actions, individual biographical

circumstances, and a unique pool of shared knowledge and professional experiences. This perspective allows us to analyze teachers' functioning not only as implementers of educational policies, but also as reflective social actors operating within specific structural contexts. In the context of research on uncertainty, the question of the ability of educational systems to create coherent models of support and develop the competencies of teaching staff in working with groups of children and students with diverse developmental and educational needs is particularly important. A key element of effective implementation of inclusive education is teachers who not only accept new challenges but also feel prepared to address them.

The project is innovative in its focus on the humanistic dimension of inclusive education, emphasizing the importance of the teacher's role in change processes and identifying the competencies and skills necessary to function in a society characterized by uncertainty of rules and norms.

The empirical research is aimed at four groups of teachers with practical experience: university teachers, secondary school teachers, primary school teachers, and preschool teachers. This sampling approach allows for the capture of diverse professional perspectives and comparison of the experiences of teachers operating at different stages of the education system. Interdisciplinary and international collaboration between researchers and practitioners facilitates the development of an in-depth, multifaceted picture of the phenomena analyzed.

The project consists of two complementary parts. The first focuses on the identification and analysis of actual manifestations of so-called uncertainty. The structures of uncertainty in teachers' experiences, while the second is focused on developing practical recommendations and proposed actions to support inclusive education. Research questions concern the identification of structures of uncertainty in teachers' perceptions, the conditions under which they arise, differences in the ways in which change is experienced and adapted to, and the significance of specific professional events and situations. Another important area of analysis is the degree to which the microsocial space of teachers' professional lives is filled with a sense of uncertainty, threat, instability, and a constant need to adapt to new demands.

Results

Based on the analysis of legal and strategic documents in individual countries and a review of the literature on the experiences of teachers working in inclusive education, key areas of comparative analysis were identified, relating to so-called structures of uncertainty. The identified areas are present in all Visegrad Group countries studied, although they differ in intensity and institutional configuration,

confirming the transnational nature of the phenomena analyzed (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2026).

The first area of structures of uncertainty concerns the systemic and political level. Sources of uncertainty primarily include frequent changes in legal regulations, discontinuity in educational policies, and ambiguous public and media discourse regarding special educational needs. This type of institutional instability limits the predictability of schools' and teachers' actions and hinders the planning of long-term solutions for inclusive education (North, 1990; March & Olsen, 2006).

The second area relates to teachers' professional competencies and their sense of professional security. Analyses indicate deficits in knowledge and preparation for working with children and students with disabilities and other special educational needs, as well as a lack of stable systemic support. Uncertainty is exacerbated by unclear criteria for evaluating teachers' performance, concerns about professional responsibility, and an overload of responsibilities, which is confirmed by research on the implementation of inclusive education (Ainscow, 2005; Florian, 2014).

The third area of uncertainty structures relates to interpersonal relationships and communication. Teachers report difficulties in relationships with students and their parents, in collaboration with other teachers, and in the functioning of specialist teams. The lack of a clear division of roles, differing interpretations of regulations, and inconsistent expectations of the school foster tension and conflict, leading to a sense of isolation in making teaching and educational decisions (Ball, 2012). In parallel to the comparative analyses, a research schedule was developed, encompassing the clarification of research objectives, an in-depth review of literature and national documents, qualitative research design, and the preparation of practical scenarios for inclusive activities. The empirical research was planned to involve teachers representing various stages of education, 40 from each country included in the analysis.

Discussion

The obtained results contribute to a broader stream of research on the functioning of inclusive education in the context of late modernity, characterized by increased risk, reflexivity, and uncertainty. The identified structures of uncertainty can be interpreted in light of concepts describing contemporary societies as operating in conditions of permanent change, such as "risk society" (Beck, 2004), "expert society" and "risk culture" (Giddens, 2001, 2008), "network society" (Castells, 2010), "flexible society" (Sennett, 2006), and "liquid modernity" (Bauman, 2006).

Public policy research indicates that education functions simultaneously as a normative discourse and a local practice, generating a persistent implementation gap between reform assumptions and their implementation (Ball, 2012). The results of this study confirm this relationship, showing that declarative support for inclusive education in the Visegrad Group countries does not always translate into stable and coherent organizational solutions in school practice.

The specific nature of the Central and Eastern European region is additionally associated with a relatively high level of uncertainty avoidance, which fosters skepticism towards new, ambiguous educational solutions. In this context, inclusive education is sometimes perceived as a threat to the stability of the system, rather than its development. Comparative analyses indicate that despite formal systemic changes, school practice often remains unchanged or reverts to previous, segregated models of education (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2018).

Conclusion

Research indicates that the Visegrad Group countries are characterized by a high level of declarative support for the concept of inclusive education, yet face difficulties implementing its principles in school practice. These structures of uncertainty are reinforced by the lack of coherent, long-term educational policies and the instability of institutional arrangements (Beck, 2005; Florian, 2014).

Teachers operate under conditions of unclear expectations, overloaded workload, and limited systemic support, which impacts their sense of professional security and willingness to undertake inclusive activities (Ainscow, 2005; Ball, 2012). As a result, inclusive education is sometimes perceived as an externally imposed project, ill-suited to the realities of everyday school practice.

Applying the category of "structures of uncertainty" allows us to identify mechanisms hindering the effective implementation of inclusive education and points to the need to stabilize educational policies, strengthen teacher professionalism, and develop systemic forms of support in Central and Eastern European countries.

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EDUCATIONAL LAW AND STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES: A CRITICAL PEDAGOGY PERSPECTIVE¹

Vzdelávacie právo a študenti so zdravotným postihnutím: Kritická pedagogická perspektíva

Agnieszka Stefanow²

Abstract: In Poland, systematic efforts have been undertaken to create conditions conducive to the optimal development of children and young people with disabilities, as well as to overcome unfavourable stereotypes associated with disability. In the implementation of these objectives, law is increasingly used as an instrument shaping social relations and educational practices. The aim of this article is to provide a critical analysis of Polish legal regulations governing the education of students with disabilities within the education system. The study is qualitative in nature and is based on an analysis of binding legislative and executive acts. The analysis was conducted from the perspective of critical pedagogy and focused on selected analytical categories, including the subjectivity of students with disabilities, access to inclusive education, forms of educational support, and mechanisms of educational selection and segregation. The results of the analysis indicate a significant discrepancy between the principles of equality, inclusion, and student subjectivity declared in educational law and the manner in which they are institutionally implemented. Inclusive education does not function as a guiding principle of the system, but rather as an option dependent on administrative decisions and institutional resources. Forms of support, despite their declared universal character, are largely compensatory in nature and tend to shift the responsibility for adaptation onto the student. The analysis leads to the conclusion that Polish educational law with regard to students with disabilities implements a model of conditional inclusion, which stabilises existing structures of the education system rather than contributing to its transformation. The article highlights the need to redefine inclusive education as a principle organising the education system and to strengthen the real subjectivity of students with disabilities in the educational process.

Keywords: inclusive education, students with disabilities, educational law, critical pedagogy, analysis of legal acts.

Absrakt: V Poľsku sa systematicky vynakladá úsilie na vytvorenie podmienok priaznivých pre optimálny rozvoj detí a mladých ľudí so zdravotným postihnutím, ako aj na prekonanie nepriaznivých stereotypov spojených so zdravotným postihnutím. Pri realizácii týchto cieľov sa právo čoraz viac využíva ako nástroj formujúci sociálne vzťahy a vzdelávacie postupy. Cieľom tohto článku je poskytnúť kritickú analýzu poľských právnych predpisov upravujúcich vzdelávanie študentov so zdravotným postihnutím v rámci vzdelávacieho systému. Štúdia má kvalitatívny charakter a vychádza z analýzy záväzných legislatívnych a výkonných aktov. Analýza bola vykonaná z perspektívy kritickej pedagogiky a zameriavala sa na vybrané analytické kategórie, vrátane subjektivity študentov so zdravotným postihnutím, prístupu k inkluzívnemu vzdelávaniu, foriem vzdelávacej podpory a mechanizmov vzdelávacieho výberu a segregácie. Výsledky analýzy poukazujú na výrazný nesúlad medzi zásadami rovnosti, inklúzie a subjektivity študentov deklarovanými v školskom práve a spôsobom, akým sú inštitucionálne implementované. Inkluzívne vzdelávanie nefunguje ako riadiaca zásada systému, ale skôr ako možnosť závislá od administratívnych rozhodnutí a inštitucionálnych zdrojov. Formy podpory, napriek ich deklarovanému univerzálnemu charakteru, majú vo veľkej miere kompenzačný charakter a majú tendenciu prenášať zodpovednosť za adaptáciu na študenta. Analýza vedie k záveru, že poľské

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školské právo vo vzťahu k študentom so zdravotným postihnutím implementuje model podmiennej inklúzie, ktorý stabilizuje existujúce štruktúry vzdelávacieho systému, namiesto toho, aby prispieval k jeho transformácii. Článok zdôrazňuje potrebu redefinovať inkluzívne vzdelávanie ako princíp organizujúci vzdelávací systém a posilniť skutočnú subjektivitu študentov so zdravotným postihnutím vo vzdelávacom procese.

Kľúčové slová: inkluzívne vzdelávanie, študenti so zdravotným postihnutím, vzdelávacie právo, kritická pedagogika, analýza právnych aktov.

Introduction

For much of the twentieth century, disability was perceived by society primarily through the lens of individual personal tragedy. Over time, however, policies towards people with disabilities evolved from basic care provided in closed institutions towards the education of children and the rehabilitation of adults. After the Second World War, influenced by the growing number of people with acquired impairments, concepts of normalisation and integration began to emerge. These concepts reflected changing social awareness of the capabilities and potential of persons with disabilities. The improvement of the life situation of people with disabilities was also significantly influenced by scientific development; through the growth of disciplines such as psychology, pedagogy, sociology, political science, and others, a more holistic understanding of disability gradually emerged (Garbat, 2015, p. 85).

The political conditions prevailing in a given country exert a significant influence on the organisation and functioning of the education system and shape educational law. Politics has always been closely intertwined with historical contexts and with the ways in which persons with disabilities have been perceived in particular periods (Apanel 2016, pp. 41–42).

A discernible tendency can be observed toward granting international legal instruments a binding character for the states that adopt them. This results from the introduction of norms obliging states to align their domestic legal frameworks with the principles set out in such instruments, as well as from the creation of mechanisms enabling citizens to pursue their rights directly before international bodies (Jankowska 2012, p. 27).

Within the Polish education system, these issues are regulated by an extensive and multi-level body of legal acts, encompassing both statutory provisions and executive regulations issued by the minister responsible for education.

The aim of this article is to provide a critical analysis of the binding legal regulations governing the situation of children with disabilities within the education system.

Theoretical Foundations

The definition of disability is conditioned by culture, beliefs, attitudes, orientations, and disciplinary perspectives. It is a multidimensional and polysemic concept that manifests itself across various areas of life and remains relative to the prevailing socio-cultural norms and standards (Kirenko, 2001, p. 64). Both Polish and international theory and practice have not developed a single, universally accepted definition of disability.

This article is grounded in the interactionist model of disability. Within this approach, disability is understood as encompassing all dimensions of the lived experience of persons with disabilities—bodily, psychological, cultural, social, and political—rather than being reduced exclusively to either a medical or a social phenomenon (Shakespeare & Watson, 2002, p. 19).

At present, a child with special educational needs may fulfil compulsory education in special, integrative, or mainstream educational settings. The choice of educational placement should be preceded by a reliable diagnosis of the child's abilities and should take into account the decision of parents or legal guardians.

When analysing the organisation of education for students with a decision on the need for special education, reference can be made to Polish literature in the field of special pedagogy, which distinguishes the following systems of education: the segregated education system (special schools, classes, and centres), the integrative education system (integrative schools and schools with integrative classes), the inclusive education system (mainstream schools) (Kościołek, 2019, p. 197).

The analysis of legal regulations was additionally situated within the perspective of critical pedagogy, which treats education—and the law regulating its functioning—as a field of power relations.

From the perspective of special pedagogy, the role of critical pedagogy is particularly significant, as critical reflection allows the long-developed theoretical and practical foundations of the field to be supplemented with a critical potential directed towards the social reality in which persons with disabilities function. This requires engaging with a complex and ambivalent social reality, within which clear and unambiguous actions and situations are increasingly difficult to identify (Krause, 2013, p. 10).

Methodology

The study is qualitative in nature and is based on the method of document analysis, understood as the description and interpretation of broadly defined artefacts (documents) subjected to internal analysis, focusing on the content of the documents.

The subject of the study consists of binding legal regulations in Poland concerning children with disabilities. The research material includes national legal acts regulating education, psychological and pedagogical support, and institutional support for children with disabilities, as well as executive regulations related to the implementation of educational law.

The aim of the study is to provide a critical analysis of the binding legal provisions regulating the situation of children with disabilities within the education system, with the objective of identifying potential mechanisms that may foster inclusion or contribute to educational exclusion. The analysis is conducted through the categories of student subjectivity, access to inclusive education, forms of support for students with disabilities, and the presence of mechanisms of selection and segregation in education.

The research procedure was designed and implemented on the basis of qualitative document analysis and included exclusively binding Polish legal acts regulating the situation of children with disabilities within the education system.

In the first stage, a review of national legal acts was conducted, encompassing statutes, regulations, and other normative documents directly or indirectly related to education, support, and the protection of the rights of children with disabilities. The criterion for the selection of research material was its normative significance and its actual impact on the organisation of the educational process.

In the second stage, the selected legal acts were subjected to a preliminary structural analysis aimed at identifying the scope of regulation and the key thematic areas addressed in the documents.

The third stage involved repeated and in-depth readings of the legal provisions and their qualitative analysis. At this stage, analytical categories derived from the adopted theoretical framework were identified, including the subjectivity of students with disabilities, access to inclusive education, forms of support, and mechanisms of educational selection and segregation.

In the fourth stage, the legal provisions were interpreted with consideration of their implications for the identified analytical categories. The analysis focused not only on the literal wording of legal norms, but also on the identification of the values and assumptions embedded in the binding legislative solutions.

The final stage consisted of synthesising the results of the analysis and formulating conclusions in relation to the research aim and the adopted theoretical foundations, with particular attention paid to the coherence of legal regulations with the principles of inclusive education.

Results

The analysis of the content of legal acts regulating the education of students with disabilities in the Polish education system constitutes a key element of this study, as it is precisely the law that defines the organisational, didactic, and institutional framework of inclusive and integrative education. Binding legal regulations not only determine the formal conditions for the implementation of the right to education, but also construct the normative position of students with disabilities within the education system by defining the scope of their rights, forms of support, and the obligations imposed on schools.

The analysis of the content of legal acts was conducted using selected analytical categories, including the subjectivity of students with disabilities, access to inclusive education, forms of support, and mechanisms of educational selection and segregation. This approach enables a coherent and in-depth interpretation of legal solutions regulating the organisation of education.

Student Subjectivity

The analysis of legal acts indicates that the subjectivity of students with disabilities in the Polish education system is declared primarily at the level of constitutional and statutory norms. The Constitution of the Republic of Poland guarantees the right to education for everyone and imposes on public authorities the obligation to provide persons with disabilities with special assistance, thereby creating formal grounds for recognising students with disabilities as subjects of educational rights. This principle is further developed in educational law, which emphasises the need to individualise the educational process and to adapt educational activities to the psychophysical abilities of the student.

At the same time, the analysis of executive regulations reveals that student subjectivity is to a significant extent conditioned by the system of psychological and pedagogical assessment. Access to specific forms of support, educational adaptations, or alternative ways of fulfilling compulsory education depends on the possession of a decision on the need for special education or an opinion issued by a psychological and pedagogical counselling centre.

Within this system, a student with a disability functions primarily as an object of diagnosis and administrative decision-making. Access to particular forms of education and support is contingent upon the possession of a decision on the need for special education, which not only describes the student's needs but also normatively constructs the student by assigning them to a specific category of deficit.

In practice, this means that the student operates within the system mainly as an addressee of institutional decisions, while their subjectivity is realised within previously defined diagnostic categories.

Consequently, despite the declarative recognition of the subjectivity of students with disabilities, educational law in practice promotes a model of education in which the student functions primarily as a recipient of support and administrative decisions. In this perspective, subjectivity assumes a formal and conditional character, constrained by institutional frameworks and adopted organisational solutions.

Access to Inclusive Education

The analysis of legal acts indicates that inclusive education is not explicitly defined in Polish law as the dominant model of educating students with disabilities. Educational law allows for the parallel functioning of mainstream, integrative, and special schools, linking the choice of educational setting closely to the assessment system and administrative decisions. This demonstrates that inclusive education within the Polish education system has a declarative and conditional character rather than a systemically superior status.

By permitting the coexistence of mainstream, integrative, and special schools, educational law does not establish inclusion as a guiding principle organising the education system, but rather treats it as one of several possible forms of schooling. As a result, the implementation of inclusive education is largely dependent on local conditions, such as organisational capacity and staffing resources, which may lead to significant disparities in the actual educational opportunities available to children in different contexts.

The analysed legal acts devote relatively little attention to school culture, interpersonal relations, and everyday teaching practices, which in practice determine whether education is genuinely inclusive or merely formally integrative. Access to inclusive education should therefore not be reduced to the formal possibility of attending a mainstream or integrative school. From the perspective of critical pedagogy, the key issue concerns the quality of participation of students with disabilities in school life and whether the school as an institution undergoes a real transformation towards inclusion or instead expects students to adapt to dominant norms of functioning. It is also significant that inclusive education, as regulated by existing legal frameworks, is not linked to an obligation to change the prevailing didactic paradigm. Consequently, inclusion is often reduced to the technical “addition” of students with disabilities to an unchanged system, without challenging the norms and structures that generate exclusion.

Particularly problematic in this context is the functioning of the assessment system as a mechanism regulating access to inclusive education. Rather than serving as a supportive tool, the assessment decision often becomes a necessary condition for initiating any form of adaptation, leading to a paradox of conditional inclusion: a child may participate in inclusive education only after being formally

recognised as “different” and “deviating from the norm.” In this sense, the system first produces difference and only then offers its compensation.

The analysis of legal acts also reveals that the law does not sufficiently safeguard the continuity of access to inclusive education. The absence of coherent systemic solutions means that access to inclusive education may be episodic, dependent on the educational stage, a change of school, or the availability of qualified staff. As a result, inclusion does not function as a stable principle organising the education system.

From the perspective of critical pedagogy, it can therefore be concluded that inclusion is embedded in a logic of managing diversity rather than serving as an impulse for a profound transformation of the school as a social institution.

Forms of Support for Students with Disabilities

The analysis of legal acts regulating forms of support for students with disabilities indicates that the support system has been constructed as extensive, multi-level, and formally accessible, encompassing both special education and psychological and pedagogical assistance. The regulation on the principles of organising and providing psychological and pedagogical support emphasises its universal character, which at the declarative level suggests a departure from an exclusively diagnostic model of support. From the perspective of critical pedagogy, however, the key issue concerns not only the scope of support, but also the way it is organised and the function it performs within the education system.

Within the existing legal framework, support for students with disabilities is primarily conceptualised in terms of intervention and compensation. The dominant assumption involves identifying student deficits and implementing measures aimed at reducing or neutralising them. This approach reinforces the individualisation of educational problems and shifts responsibility for school difficulties onto the student, while overlooking structural and institutional barriers embedded in the functioning of schools. As a result, support rarely takes the form of systemic actions oriented toward transforming the educational environment, and more often operates as a set of “corrective” measures directed at the individual.

From an analytical perspective, particular attention is drawn to the proceduralisation of support, manifested in extensive documentation requirements, team-based planning of interventions, and the necessity of formal validation of specific forms of assistance. Although these solutions are intended to ensure coherence and continuity of support, in practice they embed psychological and pedagogical assistance within the framework of administrative and bureaucratic regulation of work with the student.

The analysis of regulations also indicates that support for students with disabilities is, in many cases, implemented outside the main stream of classroom and school life. Specialist, remedial, or compensatory classes are often organised as separate interventions, which—despite their supportive intentions—may reinforce a sense of otherness and limit full participation in the educational process. In this sense, support does not always fulfil an inclusive function, but may instead contribute to forms of intra-school segregation.

From the perspective of critical pedagogy, it is also noteworthy that the current legal regulations only marginally recognise student agency in the planning and implementation of educational support. Decisions regarding forms of assistance are made primarily by adult professionals, while the role of the student is most often reduced to passive participation in predetermined interventions. The lack of explicit provisions enabling children to co-decide on forms of support reinforces a model of assistance that is more controlling than emancipatory in character.

An important aspect also concerns the dependence of support availability on the institutional resources of individual schools. Although the law imposes an obligation to organise psychological and pedagogical assistance, its actual scope and quality depend on the number and qualifications of specialists, as well as on the organisational capacities of a given institution. Consequently, support that is intended to equalise educational opportunities may, in practice, contribute to differentiated student experiences depending on the conditions under which education is delivered.

The Presence of Mechanisms of Selection and Segregation

The analysis of legal acts regulating the education of students with disabilities reveals that mechanisms of educational selection and segregation are not merely incidental side effects of the education system, but are embedded in its foundational assumptions. Although the law employs the language of support, adaptation, and equalisation of opportunities, it simultaneously constructs organisational solutions that classify students according to functional and diagnostic categories, leading to their systemic differentiation.

The key mechanism of selection remains the system of psychological and pedagogical assessment, which functions as a gateway to specific forms of education and support. The assessment decision not only entitles students to particular educational arrangements, but also classifies them within predefined categories of disability. From the perspective of critical pedagogy, this means that the diversity of students' functioning is reduced to a set of normative labels that organise and stabilise the system.

Another significant segregating mechanism is the formal differentiation between mainstream, integrative, and special schools. Although the law allows for the implementation of special education within mainstream schools, it simultaneously legitimises the existence of separate educational institutions designated exclusively for students with specific disabilities. As a result, the education system operates through parallel educational pathways that differ not only in organisational structure, but also in social status, educational expectations, and prospects for further education and social participation.

From a critical pedagogical perspective, the practice of assigning students to individualised instruction is particularly problematic. Despite its protective and compensatory justification, individual instruction often leads to a radical limitation of the child's social experiences. Legally sanctioned as a form of fulfilling compulsory education, individual instruction may in practice function as a mechanism of exclusion from the social space of the school, reinforcing student isolation and reducing education to an instructional relationship.

Mechanisms of selection and segregation are also evident in intra-school organisational practices, such as separating specialist, remedial, or therapeutic classes from the main stream of classroom life. Although these solutions are justified by the need for specialised support, in practice they may result in the fragmentation of students' educational experiences and the symbolic separation of students from the "normal" course of education.

As a result, mechanisms of selection and segregation—despite being formally justified by concern for students' well-being and the adaptation of education to individual needs—serve to stabilise the education system by protecting its dominant norms and structures from the necessity of profound transformation. Segregation therefore does not constitute an exception to the rule of inclusion, but rather one of the fundamental tools for managing diversity within the Polish education system.

Discussion

The analysis of legal acts regulating the education of students with disabilities in Poland reveals the complexity and multidimensional character of the solutions adopted within the education system. On the one hand, educational law and executive regulations explicitly refer to the principles of equal opportunities, child subjectivity, and the necessity of providing educational support tailored to individual needs. On the other hand, the manner in which these solutions are organised points to the existence of numerous tensions between declared assumptions and their practical implementation.

Particular attention is drawn to the way in which the subjectivity of a child with a disability is constructed in legal regulations. Although the child is formally

recognised as a subject of the right to education, their functioning within the education system remains largely dependent on diagnostic procedures and administrative decisions.

A similar ambivalence can be observed in regulations concerning inclusive education. The analysis of legal provisions indicates that inclusive education has not been clearly established as a superior principle organising the education system, but rather functions alongside other forms of schooling. This model results in access to inclusive education being dependent on a range of extra-systemic factors, such as staffing resources, school infrastructure, and local interpretations of regulations. Consequently, the educational experiences of students with disabilities may differ significantly, despite the existence of formally uniform legal provisions.

With regard to forms of support for students with disabilities, it should be noted that the law provides for a broad catalogue of support measures, encompassing both psychological and pedagogical assistance and specialised forms of education. At the same time, the organisation of this support reflects the dominance of a compensatory approach, focused on identifying student deficits and neutralising them. Such a model promotes the individualisation of educational problems, while paying less attention to the structural and organisational barriers inherent in the functioning of schools as institutions.

The analysis also reveals the presence of mechanisms of educational selection and segregation which—although justified by concern for the child's well-being—in practice lead to differentiated educational pathways. The assessment system, the differentiation of school types, and the possibility of assigning students to individual instruction result in the education of students with disabilities being implemented through separate organisational arrangements, which may limit their full participation in the social life of the school.

Conclusion

The conducted analysis of legal acts regulating the education of students with disabilities in the Polish education system indicates that the existing solutions are extensive and multi-level, yet do not always constitute a coherent and unambiguous model of inclusive education. Educational law declares equal opportunities, child subjectivity, and the necessity of individualising the educational process, while simultaneously basing the implementation of these principles on diagnostic, procedural, and organisational mechanisms that significantly condition access to education and support.

Inclusive education, despite its strong presence in legal and pedagogical discourse, does not function as a superior principle organising the education

system, but rather as one of several possible forms of schooling. As a result, its implementation depends on local conditions and institutional resources, which may lead to inequalities in the educational experiences of students with disabilities. Similarly, forms of support—although formally accessible—are largely compensatory in nature and are implemented in ways that do not always foster the full inclusion of students in school life.

The analysis also demonstrates that mechanisms of educational selection and segregation remain a significant element of the education system. These solutions, despite their declared protective purpose, may reinforce the distinctiveness of educational experiences of students with disabilities and limit their social participation.

From the perspective of critical pedagogy, further development of legal regulations should therefore move towards strengthening the real subjectivity of children with disabilities, reducing the selective character of systemic solutions, and creating conditions conducive to the consistent and sustainable implementation of inclusive education. Only such an approach may contribute to narrowing the gap between the declared objectives of the education system and everyday educational practice.

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INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN FRANCE: LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL EVOLUTION, ETHICAL CHALLENGES¹

Inkluzívne vzdelávanie vo Francúzsku: Právny a inštitucionálny vývoj, etické výzvy

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Abstract: This paper examines the evolution of inclusive education in France from a legal, institutional, and ethical perspective. Initially structured around disability and integration, French educational policy progressively shifted toward an inclusive paradigm grounded in accessibility, equity, and participation for all learners. The study analyzes the historical construction of compulsory schooling, the articulation between mainstream and specialized education, and the role of medico-social institutions. It further explores administrative coordination tools, professional practices, and research approaches supporting inclusive schooling. Finally, the paper discusses ethical challenges related to educational justice, teacher training, and inclusive didactics within the French Republican school model.

Key words: inclusive education, special educational needs, French education system, educational justice, accessibility.

Abstrakt: Táto štúdia skúma vývoj inkluzívneho vzdelávania vo Francúzsku z právneho, inštitucionálneho a etického hľadiska. Pôvodne orientovaná na postih a integráciu sa francúzska vzdelávacia politika postupne presunula k inkluzívnemu paradigmatu založenému na prístupnosti, rovnosti a participácii všetkých žiakov. Štúdia analyzuje historickú konštrukciu povinného školstva, prepojenie medzi bežným a špecializovaným vzdelávaním a úlohu mediko-sociálnych inštitúcií. Ďalej skúma administratívne koordinačné nástroje, profesionálne praktiky a výskumné prístupy podporujúce inkluzívne školstvo. Nakoniec článok diskutuje etické výzvy súvisiace so školskou spravodlivosťou, prípravou učiteľov a inkluzívnou didaktikou v rámci francúzskeho republikánskeho modelu školy.

Kľúčové slová: inkluzívne vzdelávanie, špeciálne vzdelávacie potreby, francúzsky vzdelávací systém, školská spravodlivosť, prístupnosť.

Introduction

In France, the path toward inclusion initially developed through a legal focus on disability rather than through an explicit conception of inclusive education. Early public policies, notably the Law of 30 June 1975 on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, promoted the integration of children with disabilities by allowing them to adapt to existing school structures. Integration was conceived as the adjustment of individuals to the school system rather than the transformation of educational environments themselves.

A significant turning point occurred in the early 2000s with legislation on equal rights and opportunities, which redefined disability not as a fixed personal

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condition but as the result of interactions between individuals and their environments (the Law n° 2005-102, 2005). This conceptual shift led to the emergence of the notion of special educational needs and reshaped educational policy. The Law of 8 July 2013 on the Refoundation of the School of the Republic formally introduced inclusive education into the French legal framework, affirming that all children share the capacity to learn and progress (the Law ° 2013-595, 2013). More recently, the Law of 26 July 2019 for a School of Trust established a public service for inclusive education, reinforcing accessibility and participation for all learners (the Law n° 2019-791, 2019).

1. The French Educational System: Mainstream and Specialized Schooling

1.1 Compulsory Education: Historical Background

The contemporary French school system emerged from a post-revolutionary legacy shaped by the ideological mission of educating citizens of the Republic. Public education was designed to guarantee uniform knowledge and progressively freed itself from religious influence, which had maintained a near monopoly on education since the Renaissance. Free, secular, and compulsory schooling became a sovereign responsibility of the State, while a private sector continued to exist under increasing regulation through contractual arrangements with the Ministry of National Education.

At the operational level, the construction of this collective model of education can be traced back to the 12–15th centuries and, more broadly, to the Greco-Latin heritage, which until then had largely served limited segments of the population within confessional or military frameworks. The French Revolution marked a decisive break with these models, asserting that the State should organize public instruction in the name of progress, as affirmed by Robespierre in 1793.

The nineteenth century witnessed the rise of a centralized and republican educational model: the Guizot Law of 28 June 1833 established municipal primary schools, and education became free, secular, and compulsory with the Ferry Laws of 16 June 1881 and 28 March 1882. In the twentieth century, compulsory schooling was extended to the age of sixteen by the Berthoin Ordinance of 6 January 1959, and the *collège unique* was instituted by the Haby Law of 11 July 1975. In 1981, the creation of Priority Education Zones (ZEP) marked the territorialization of educational policies (Circular No. 81-535 of 28 December 1981).

In 2005, the Common Core of Knowledge and Competences was established by the Education Orientation and Planning Law of 23 April 2005 and subsequently revised, with cultural education formally integrated in 2015 (Decree No. 2015-372 of 31 March 2015). More recently, reforms transformed the *high school examination*: the Law for a School of Trust of 26 July 2019 abolished general tracks

in favor of specialized subjects and introduced continuous assessment of knowledge and competences.

The French education system is governed by the Ministry of National Education and, for higher education, by the Ministry of Higher Education and of Research. Since the Law for a School of Trust (2019), schooling has been compulsory from the age of three to sixteen, while training through schooling, apprenticeship, or civic service is mandatory until the age of eighteen. The system is structured into primary education (preschool and elementary), secondary education, and higher education. Compulsory schooling begins in preschool (age 3–6), continues through elementary education (6–11), lower secondary education (11–14), and upper secondary education (15–14), culminating in a national diploma granting access to higher or vocational education. Professional pathways constitute an alternative to general education and are recognized through qualifications registered in the National Professional Certifications (RNCP).

2. Inclusive Schooling in France: Legal and Institutional Challenges

2.1 Administrative Organization of a School for All

The principle of the School of the Republic, established by the 2013 law, aims to ensure the continuity and success of educational pathways for all pupils within a framework of equity and accessibility. Grounded in the conviction that every pupil is capable of learning and progressing, this principle mobilizes the educational community to implement pedagogical adaptations, human support, and medico-social arrangements designed to respond to individual needs.

According to the Ministry of National Educationⁱ, at the start of the 2025 school year, inclusive education policy was reflected in the schooling of more than 520,600 pupils with disabilities, the recruitment of 2,000 additional accompanying staff (AESH), and the opening of nearly 480,000 Inclusive Pathway Booklets (LPI). These developments illustrate both the consolidation of support networks and sustained political commitment to an accessible school system.

The National Disability Conference of 2023 further strengthened this dynamic through expanded professional training, the deployment of Medico-Social Mobile Support Teams (EMAS), the creation of Schooling Support Centers (PAS), and alignment with the National Strategy for Neurodevelopmental Disorders (2023–2027).

2.2 School-Based Responses to Special Educational Needs

Following the democratization of the French education system, national education policies underwent a process of massification after 1945, laying the foundations for a school for all. Lessard and Carpentier distinguish three phases in this evolution: modernization and democratization (1945–1973), territorialized institutionalization (1970–1990), and a contemporary phase emphasizing the personalization of educational pathways.

The conceptual foundations of inclusive schooling foreground the notion of special educational needs, inspired by Gulliford's theorization of *special educational needs* in a work addressed to teachers. Criticizing approaches that define pupils through their deficits, it proposed a perspective that accounts for both personal and environmental factors, thereby eliminating the boundary between mainstream and special education and emphasizing differentiated support according to individual needs.

In France, social and migratory changes, combined with advances in didactic research and learning psychology, have led to a rethinking of pedagogical practices around equality of opportunity. The Haby Act of 1975 represents a decisive step in this democratization process by establishing the principle of *lower secondary school for all* and introducing curricular homogenization to ensure uniform educational standards across the national territory. The law also allows entry into primary school from the age of five and promotes pedagogical differentiation according to pupils' needs.

The Savary Act of 1982 on priority education zones marked a break with strict egalitarianism by introducing a logic of positive discrimination. At the same time, the development of neuroscience and cognitive sciences contributed to pedagogies focused on pupils' capacity to develop competencies required in a rapidly changing world.

The Jospin Education Orientation Act of 1989 further reinforced a pupil-centered approach by positioning learners and their needs at the core of the education system. In parallel, the decentralization laws of 1982 introduced new modes of educational governance. From 1985 onward, secondary schools became Local Public Educational Institutions (EPLÉ), benefiting from increased autonomy to better address pupils' needs.

The Law of 11 February 2005 on equal rights and opportunities, followed by the Law of 26 July 2019 for a School of Trust, strengthened this inclusive dynamic by proclaiming the right of every pupil to schooling adapted to their needs, particularly for pupils with disabilities.

However, as Woollven (2021) points out, the concept of *special educational needs* remains ambiguous within French education policy. Although referenced in the Education Code, it does not correspond to an administrative category, and

available statistical data mainly concern pupils with disabilities (DEPP, 2019). Yet this group also includes allophone pupils, whose educational needs are assessed through Career Guidance and Information Centers (CIO) or CASNAV (Academic Centers for the Schooling of Newly Arrived Allophone Pupils and Children from Itinerant Families), leading to placement in UPE2A units (Pedagogical Units for Newly Arrived Allophone Pupils).

2.3 Coordination of Professional Roles

To ensure coherence among these various arrangements, the Inclusive Pathway Booklet (LPI) has become a central digital tool. Implemented as part of the CAP École Inclusive program (Ministry of National Education, 2024), the LPI enables shared monitoring of pupils' needs, adaptations, and supports, while facilitating communication between schools, families, and medico-social partners.

Within this framework of coordinated support, the national deployment of Schooling Support Centers (PAS) since 2023 has strengthened responsiveness and cooperation among educational and healthcare professionals. These centers bring together specialized teachers, psychologists, healthcare staff, and social workers to intervene rapidly with pupils experiencing difficulties—regardless of their nature—and to support teaching teams in identifying appropriate solutions.

2.4 Specialized Educational Structures

Inclusive schooling also relies on a structured set of specialized arrangements that ensure differentiated responses to diverse needs. Localized Units for Inclusive Education (ULIS), governed by Circular No. 2015-129 of 21 August 2015, enable pupils with disabilities to receive adapted instruction while remaining partially included in mainstream classrooms. In 2025, more than 11,400 ULIS units are in operation across France, illustrating the institutional commitment to schooling as close as possible to ordinary settings.

For young children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD), Preschool Autism Teaching Units (UEMA) and Primary Autism Teaching Units (UEEA)—created by the interministerial instruction of 3 May 2016 and Circular DGCS/DGESCO No. 2018-168—support adapted schooling based on structured learning and multidisciplinary support.

Teaching Centers for Deaf Pupils (PEJS), established by Circular No. 2017-011 of 3 February 2017, ensure bilingual education (French Sign Language and spoken/written French) and an accessible educational environment, contributing to the recognition of linguistic and cultural diversity within inclusive schooling.

Other structures support pupils facing severe and persistent learning difficulties. Adapted General and Vocational Education Sections (SEGPA),

regulated by Circular No. 2015-176 of 28 October 2015, provide adapted pedagogy and practical learning to support social and vocational integration. Regional Adapted Education Institutions (EREA), defined by Circular No. 2017-068 of 20 April 2017, offer reinforced support, sometimes through boarding arrangements, combining general education, vocational training, and individualized educational guidance.

2.5 Specialized Education within the Medico-Social Sector

The Care and education Institutes (Instituts Médico-Éducatifs, IME) play a central role in the development of France's special education system for children with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Originating in the 1960s, IME were established to provide a combined framework of care and social support. The 1975 Orientation Law for Persons with Disabilities formalizes the schooling for children with disabilities, integrating Ministry of Education teachers into IME. At that time, disability is defined through a medical and functional lens, as a deficiency or incapacity requiring specialized care, education, or employment support, conception emphasizing on protection and compensation. It leads the development of a care and educational system governed by the Ministry of Health and Solidarity, and providing from the Ministry of Education teachers qualified in adaptive pedagogies. However, this adaptive model remains designed for a limited segment of the population.

The 1989's decree reorganized IME, clarifying their missions and introducing personalized educational projects (PPS), reflecting more active learning and participation. Reform of 2002 in the social sector and the Externalized Teaching Units (UEE) facilitate partial inclusion of IME pupils while maintaining multidisciplinary support within the institutes.

The organization of specialized institutions and services for children and young people with disabilities constitutes a historical pillar of French special education policy. The Orientation Act of 30 June 1975 marked a foundational moment by establishing the State's responsibility for the education of children with disabilities. It affirmed the principle that the national community must guarantee access to adapted education for every child and required the State to provide qualified teaching staff from the Ministry of National Education within specialized institutions.

The implementation framework was specified by Decree No. 78-442 of 24 March 1978 and Circular No. 78-188 of 8 June 1978, defining teaching arrangements and cooperation between educational and medico-social services. Further reform occurred with Decree No. 89-798 of 27 October 1989 and the *Annexes XXIV*, which reorganized the missions and categories of institutions (IME,

ITEP, IEM, IES, SESSAD) and strengthened the presence of national education teachers within these settings.

The Law of 2 January 2002 on social and medico-social action emphasized users rights and personalized pathways, shifting from institutional care toward active participation of pupils and families. Subsequent texts, including Circular No. 2007-194 of 14 May 2007 and Decree No. 2009-378 of 2 April 2009, reinforced cooperation between mainstream schools and medico-social institutions through the creation of teaching units (UE) under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education.

The Law of February 2005 redefines disability as: any limitation of activity or restriction of participation in life in society suffered by a person because of a substantial, lasting, or definitive alteration of one or more physical, sensory, mental, cognitive, or psychological functions, a multiple disability, or a disabling health disorder. This social and interactional definition marks a conceptual turning point as linked in environment.

The Instruction of 23 June 2016 further promoted inclusion by encouraging the development of Externalized Teaching Units (UEE), enabling pupils supported by medico-social services to attend mainstream schools part-time while benefiting from multidisciplinary support. This evolution reflects a shift from specialized care toward co-education and partnership, making mainstream schooling the norm rather than the exception.

Three main categories of pupils receive education outside ordinary school settings: pupils with disabilities requiring medico-social support; pupils temporarily or permanently excluded from school for health reasons; and minors in detention. In all cases, the objective is to ensure continuity of the right to education and prevent school dropout. Educational provision follows national curricula and relies on personalized projects (PPS, PAI, PAP, PPRE), coordinated by multidisciplinary teams. Examination accommodations are governed by Circular No. 2015-127 of 3 August 2015, ensuring equity in certification.

Overall, these arrangements embody an inclusive conception of public education based on the right to schooling for all, interministerial cooperation, and personalized educational pathways, in accordance with Law No. 2013-595 of 8 July 2013 on the refoundation of the School of the Republic and Law No. 2005-102 of 11 February 2005 on equal rights and opportunities.

Since 1995, among approximately 115,000 children are placed in care structures, about 76% received schooling, with 60 % attending full-time in the institution, 13% in mainstream schools full-time, and 4 % part-time; 24 % are not schooled at all. By 2005, children and adolescents with disabilities enrolled in education had risen to 235,400, with around 64 % attending mainstream schools, in ordinary or adapted classes. During the same period, 76,300 children continued

to be schooled in care structures. In 2022, among children aged 6–15 in care structure, 92 % were receiving schooling, and 64 % were educated in mainstream schools. Today, IME serve children and adolescents aged 3–20 with moderate to severe intellectual or developmental disabilities, offering structured educational and therapeutic programs. Approximately 75 % of pupils with disabilities in France are enrolled in ordinary schools, while around 20 % remain in specialized care institutions.

In the same time, the number of specialized institutions in France increased significantly between 2006 and 2022, by 24.8 %, according to DREES. The Therapeutic, Educational, and Pedagogical Institutes (ITEP) sector experienced the growth during 2006–2018 by 9.5 %. As of June 1, 2023, over 11,000 places were still lacking in IME.

The evolution of educational policy for children with special educational needs in France reflects a conceptual shift, from a system of protection and segregation (1975) to the one grounded in equality, and participation (2002 and 2005). The notion of the disabled child evolved from a passive recipient of care to an active learner, transition to a participatory model involving children and families in decision-making processes.

3. Research on Inclusion in Education: Fields and Methodologies

Academic interest in inclusion emerged in the 1990s through the sociology and philosophy of disability. Researchers such as Chauvière, Plaisance, Gardou, and Stiker examined how educational and social systems construct disability. Specialized journals like *La Nouvelle Revue de l'adaptation et de la scolarisation* (1998) and *ALTER – European Journal of Disability Research* (2007) established a dedicated scientific field, addressing ethical, political, and pedagogical dimensions.

Also Québec's inclusive policies influence French research, leading to international collaboration and the creation of the LISIS laboratory (2010), networks connecting inclusion to questions of equity, citizenship, and accessibility. The didactic turn for accessibility of learning is marked from the mid-2010s; the field expands toward exploring how learning situations become accessible to all students. Researchers such as Toullec-Théry examine practices in ordinary classrooms, analyzing how teachers adapt tasks, resources, and interactions.

Research draws on multiple disciplines: education sciences, psychology, sociology, didactics, and plural methodologies are used: document-based and policy analysis, study institutional frameworks; experimental and survey research, exploring the effects of inclusive strategies; ethnographic and video-based studies of teaching practices in vivo. These diverse approaches generate

debate between evidence-based (quantitative) and practice-based (qualitative, anthropological) perspectives. Yet, their coexistence enriches the field by plural understandings of inclusion.

A growing number of studies now adopt collaborative and participatory methodologies, with teachers and researchers co-constructing knowledge. Drawing on frameworks like Sensevy's cooperative didactic engineering or Bryk's improvement science, such research explores inclusion with practitioners rather than on them. This paradigm shift seeks to identify what keeps certain learners "out of play" and to transform classroom practices accordingly. It also reflects a broader political ambition: to rethink the very form of schooling through accessibility, cooperation, and shared professional responsibility.

4. Ethical Foundations of Inclusive Didactics

The challenge in bridging conceptual divides between disability and needs, between evidence and practice, and sustaining a shared vision of accessibility as the foundation of educational justice. At the theoretical level, inclusion consists in adapting the school to the pupil (Garel, 2010) in difference from integrating the pupil into a pre-existing structure. Welcoming and caring school would transform the norm itself to embrace all singularities (Bruchon, 2014; Le Capitaine, 2013).

Didactic researches show that the teacher training in inclusive schooling remains insufficient (Charrier, 2013; Ebersold & Détraux, 2013, 2019, 2022). Teachers feel unprepared to handle diversity, as their training rarely addresses learning difficulties, inevitable in everyday practice. Facing with growing heterogeneity, teachers call for complementary resources and training, increasing coherence of their ethics and practice. The Ministry of National Education's 2016 circular introduced a specific module on the schooling of pupils with special educational needs. Even in 2025, its implementation composes with significant disparities: training limited to legislative overviews in 2 hours.

Some researchers (Altet, 2012) have hypothesized the need for integrated mobilization of knowledge in complex situations, yet, empirical studies remain rare. Initial teacher training in France is currently in a phase of university degree consolidation, to formalize and structure programs. The connection between teacher training and empirical research emerges as a critical factor in developing effective, evidence-based frameworks for inclusive education.

François Dubet describes a transformation in the societal model that profoundly affects education, marking a shift from an ideal of *integration* toward a model of *cohesion*. Historically, the Republican school embodied a promise of universality, integrating every child into a single educational framework while abstracting from social differences in the name of equality. This ideal, deeply

rooted in a conception of the State as a sovereign institution, corresponded to an *integrative* school model, grounded in equality before the law and designed to guarantee the unity of the social body. Such diversity calls for a redefinition of educational justice—one that no longer relies on uniformity of treatment, but rather on the differentiation of support mechanisms.

This reconceptualization presupposes *equity in learning*, understood as the creation of educational conditions that make success possible for every pupil. In this perspective, the mission of the school is transformed into a moral and professional commitment: to enable achievement across a plurality of educational pathways and learning capacities. This evolution is simultaneously technical, organizational, and ethical, affecting both the public education service and the broader conception of solidarity. The epistemic neutrality and hierarchical organization of knowledge that characterized nineteenth-century schooling give way to an inclusive paradigm grounded in responsibility toward the Other (Levinas), justice as fairness (Rawls), and the recognition of fundamental human capabilities (Nussbaum). These philosophical frameworks make it possible to rethink the educational mission not merely as a sovereign function of standardization, but as a service to the individual. Within this framework, teachers, inspectors, and teacher educators become co-responsible for creating accessible educational processes, justified by the capabilities they enable.

My researches are about this transition from an imposed, institutional form of solidarity to a reflective and shared solidarity, based on cooperation among actors and the recognition of otherness. The contemporary challenge facing public education lies in reconciling these two legacies: preserving the universalist ambition of the Republican school while fully assuming the moral and professional responsibility of adapting education—through the agency of each teacher—so that it becomes genuinely accessible to every learner.

Conclusion

Inclusive education in France forms part of a global movement initiated in the early 1990s following the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994). While early policies focused on disability, contemporary approaches emphasize universal accessibility. Persistent tensions remain between universalist ambitions and deficit-based categorizations, reflected in the coexistence of mainstream and specialized structures.

The central challenge lies in reconciling the universalist legacy of the Republican school with the ethical responsibility to adapt education to learner diversity. This research positions inclusive didactics and participatory inquiry as key levers for transforming educational practices toward genuine accessibility for all learners.

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CROSSLEY, Nicola and Des HEWITT (2025). *Inclusion: A Principled Guide for Early Career Teachers*. New York: Routledge. 299 p. ISBN 978-1-003-45650-6¹

Inclusion: A Principled Guide for Early Career Teachers is a recently published monograph, the widely discussed yet often polarized issue of inclusion in education. The book is written by Nicola Crossley, a Chief Executive Officer at Liberty Academy Trust, UK and Vice Chair of the Ethics, Inclusion and Equalities Committee and the SEN Representative for the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), and by Den Hewitt, Emeritus Professor of Teacher Education in the Centre for Teacher Education, University of Warwick, UK. The publication aims to provide an overarching guide for early career teachers, moving from general theoretical perspectives on inclusion to concrete examples of practical application in educational settings. In this way, the book provides a clear framework to guide beginner teachers through the complexities of the educational landscape.

The monograph as a whole follows a consistent and repetitive structure, in which the theoretical background is followed by reflection points and a final reflective section containing thought-provoking questions related to the topic. Each chapter is concluded with recommendations for further reading and a chapter summary, which is presented to the reader in the form of a summary poster. This clear and predictable structure enhances the accessibility of the text and supports early career teachers in linking theoretical concepts with reflective and practical considerations.

The publication consists of eleven chapters that examine inclusion from multiple perspectives, with chapters incorporating a case studies, examples in practice and a set of challenging questions for reader. Each chapter is grounded in established philosophical, pedagogical, and psychological frameworks, drawing on the work of well-known philosophers, psychologists, and educational theorists. The first chapter serves as an introduction to the book and highlights the need to address new challenges in educational settings arising from the contemporary world. The second chapter adopts a philosophical and psychological perspective on the role of values in teachers' professional lives, discussing personal, institutional, and professional values, as well as inclusive values in education. The following chapter explores how inclusion and inclusive education may be understood in practice, by identifying how children learn. The chapter also briefly describes theories of education from different psychological views and cognitive functions, in children brain, which are linked to learning. Another chapter begins

¹ Prijaté do redakcie/Paper submitted: 07. 01. 2026

by defining the concept of curriculum and subsequently explores its adaptation for inclusive education, highlighting knowledge-building schemas and the central role of language in the learning process. The fifth chapter deals with various theoretical approaches to behavior linked to inclusion, with particular attention paid to punitive justice, operant conditioning and relational practice. The chapter that follows talks about gifted, or more able learners and inclusive pedagogy for all. The seventh chapter examines the barriers faced by children with special educational needs, moving from an overview of relevant legislation to a discussion of the range of needs teachers may encounter in the classroom. Another chapter focuses on disadvantage and outlines multiple ways of supporting children from disadvantaged backgrounds as a key aspect of inclusive education. The ninth chapter examines cultural and linguistic diversity among both pupils and teachers. A further part of the publication discusses the development of positive relationships between the community, the school, and the family. The monograph is concluded by final chapter which discusses inclusive teaching in the current context, talks about the teacher as a change leader and encourages teachers to reflect on the next steps in their thinking about inclusive practices in education.

The publication is written in a reader-friendly manner, making it accessible and easy to understand. It covers a wide range of topics related to teaching, learning, inclusion, cognitive processes and educational theories, with all key points concisely summarized in visual posters. All themes discussed in the publication are linked to inclusive practices and to ways of promoting inclusion in school settings. For this reason, the monograph can be regarded as a valuable guide for beginner teachers, but also practicing teachers, special educators as well as for anyone interested in the topic of education, inclusion and children with special educational needs.

Dominika Molčanová²

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DONE, Elizabeth J. (2025). *Theorising Exclusionary Pressures in Education: Why Inclusion Becomes Exclusion*. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland. 289 p. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-031-78969-4¹

Theorising Exclusionary Pressures in Education: Why Inclusion Becomes Exclusion is the result of collaboration among an international, multidisciplinary collective of authors from Europe, the Americas, Asia, Africa, and Australia. The collection comprises 17 contributions, edited by Elizabeth J. Done. The primary aim of the publication is to examine the gap between the rhetoric of inclusive policies and the lived reality of exclusion experienced by many pupils and students across education systems. The text serves as a study resource for both educators and students.

One of the central ideas of the publication is its rejection of viewing exclusion or segregated education as an anomaly or an implementation failure; that is, it rejects individualised explanations of exclusion. Relevant stakeholders, such as teachers, school leaders, and specialist staff, are not portrayed as the primary drivers of segregation, but rather as actors working within constrained education systems that limit the ability to enact inclusive policies. This systemic perspective shifts responsibility away from individuals toward policymakers and encourages readers to reflect on how governance operates within education systems, rather than identifying problems and solutions solely at the level of professional practice. A recurring argument throughout the volume is that exclusionary practices are often a structural feature of systems, including those that explicitly declare inclusive values. The publication draws attention to this paradox and invites readers to reconsider what inclusion truly means in practice.

The volume is structured into three interconnected subsections, progressing from theory through practice to the mechanisms of prejudice formation. The first section focuses on the theoretical foundations and conceptual re-examinations of inclusion, exclusion, and segregation. Chapters in this section engage with established concepts such as special education, defectology, leadership, belonging, and normality, and describe how historical and ideological assumptions shape these concepts. The second section examines educational practices and institutional processes that often have a segregating effect. These chapters analyse seemingly routine practices, such as assessment, diagnosis, differentiation, disciplinary procedures, digitalisation, and research methodologies, that significantly shape children's educational trajectories. The third section addresses prejudice and the social dimensions of exclusion. In this section, the authors examine how exclusionary pressures are influenced by

¹ Prijaté do redakcie/Paper submitted: 08. 01. 2026

factors like disability, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, language, and others. The chapters highlight how dominant social norms are embedded within educational institutions and curricula.

Overall, this structure allows tracing how abstract ideas are translated into everyday educational realities and examining the roles of disability, gender, ethnicity, and economic background in these processes. Particularly compelling are chapters that focus on less visible and informal practices—such as diagnostic processes, disciplinary norms, or pedagogical approaches—that subtly reproduce marginalisation while remaining largely unquestioned.

A significant strength of the publication is its international scope. Contributions from Europe, the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Australia provide insight into the contextual specificity of regional inclusive policies while also revealing shared global patterns. This breadth strengthens the argument that pressures leading to exclusion are not isolated anomalies but rather reflect broader trends within contemporary education systems.

The volume compiles a wide range of theoretical perspectives from authors with diverse scholarly backgrounds. For readers, the text's conceptual density and tendency towards abstraction may be challenging, as empirical and practical dimensions are often pushed into the background. A limitation of the publication is its heavy reliance on dense theoretical frameworks, within which critical reflection or clear methodological grounding is at times insufficient. Although the editor highlights theoretical pluralism as a strength of the volume, this makes it challenging to identify a coherent analytical thread. The chapters tend to function in relative isolation, developing highly specific critiques with limited dialogue between them or contribution to a cumulative understanding of exclusionary pressures in education. Consequently, the volume reads more as a mosaic of theoretical critiques than as an integrated theoretical project.

Another limitation of the publication is its limited engagement with empirical evidence. Many chapters rely primarily on discourse analysis, conceptual critique, or secondary literature and lack systematic engagement with data. Where case studies are presented, they often function more as illustrations than as analytically robust investigations, raising questions about their generalisability and evidentiary strength.

Overall, *Theorising Exclusionary Pressures in Education* avoids simplistic solutions. Rather than offering technocratic solutions, it calls for sustained critical reflection and emphasises the need for theoretically grounded analysis as a prerequisite for any meaningful move towards more just and inclusive education. While the theoretically dense text may challenge readers seeking

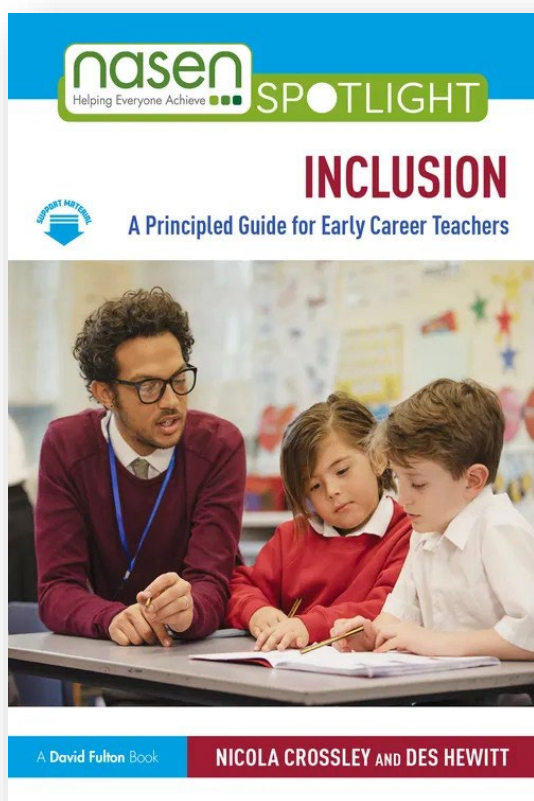
primarily practical guidance, it is precisely this refusal of reductionism that constitutes one of the publication's greatest strengths.

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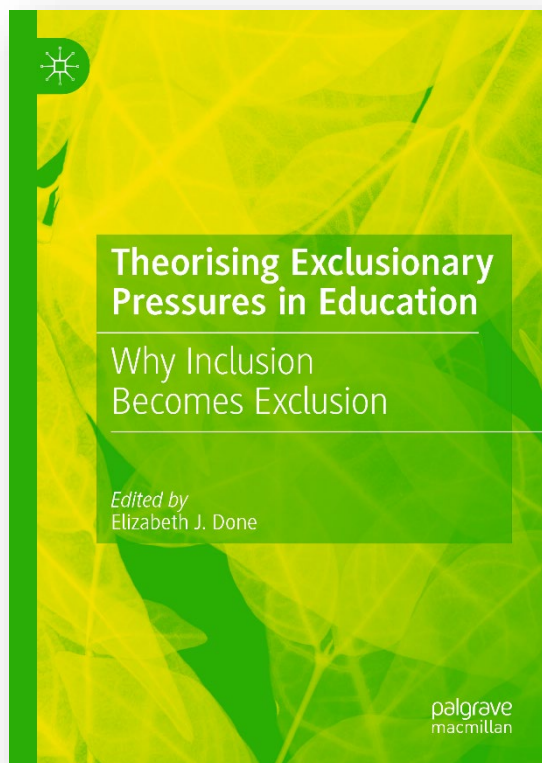
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DONE, Elizabeth J. (2025). *Theorising Exclusionary Pressures in Education: Why Inclusion Becomes Exclusion*. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland. 289 p. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-031-78969-4

Theorising Exclusionary Pressures in Education: Why Inclusion Becomes Exclusion, edited by Elizabeth J. Done, critically examines how contemporary education systems reproduce exclusion despite formal commitments to inclusion. Bringing together seventeen chapters by an international, multidisciplinary group of scholars, the volume challenges individualised and technocratic explanations of exclusion and instead foregrounds structural, political, and discursive forces shaping educational practices. Organised around theory, practice, and prejudicial logics, the book analyses how everyday routines, policies, and institutional norms contribute to marginalisation. Intended for students, educators, and postgraduate students, it offers a theoretically rich framework for rethinking inclusion as a political and ethical project.



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