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## Preparation of future teachers for teaching in inclusive schools from the viewpoint of cooperation with parents of children with special educational needs

**Przygotowywanie przyszłych nauczycieli  
do pracy w szkołach z oddziałami integracyjnymi  
z perspektywy współpracy z rodzicami dzieci  
o specjalnych potrzebach edukacyjnych**

**Abstrakt:** Przygotowywanie studentów do zawodu nauczyciela wymaga od nas pozna-  
nowania złożoności kontekstów edukacyjnych, w których nauczyciele wykonują swój za-  
wód. Jednym z ważniejszych obszarów, o których uczą się nauczyciele w trakcie studiów,  
jest rodzina. Badanie go przyczynia się do poszerzania wiedzy zawodowej studentów  
w świetle różnych aspektów: społecznościowych, zawodowych i indywidualnych. Temat  
ten zajmuje szczególne miejsce w przygotowaniu przyszłych nauczycieli do edukacji inte-  
gracyjnej/włączającej. Autorka ukazuje pewne teoretyczne podstawy i empiryczne wyni-  
ki badań w odniesieniu do społeczeństwa: szkoła/szkoła włączająca — nauczyciel, rodzic,  
uczeń/student.

**Słowa kluczowe:** uczniowie ze specjalnymi potrzebami edukacyjnymi, rodzina, szkoła,  
szkoła integracyjna/włączająca, współpraca rodzic — nauczyciel, nauczyciele, przyszli  
nauczyciele, przygotowanie w kolegium.

## Introduction

In defining the current issues in pedagogy, the Czech author J. Průcha (2000, pp. 170—172) is mentioning the parent-teacher cooperation as one of the key aspects. The cooperation and respective preparation of teachers for this area of teaching came to the attention of experts thanks to the many empirical findings in various countries practically suggesting that teachers encounter educational problems that cannot adequately be solved.

The teaching theory and educational experience suggest that family and school represent the two most important social institutions for pupils. This is particularly amplified in a situation where they contribute to upbringing the pupils/children with special educational needs. In its educational operations, the school builds on what the children received in their families and in their contacts with parents. In doing so, both institutions are carriers of multiple functions and are focusing on meeting the children's natural needs. Each of them is focusing on the fulfillment of different dominant priority needs. The difference between the two is that the school provides professional educational activities prepared by experts and, in contrast, family education is based more on emotional experience and parents' experience (in this aspect, it can be termed lay education). Both focus on optimum development of the child/pupil. This can be accomplished only if the family and the school respect each other and consider themselves as the most important educational partners (see Kurincová, 2001, pp. 177—211). M. Mendel considers the teacher-parent partnership as human and social capital given its multidimensional impacts on those directly involved, but also thanks to the mediated effects on the environment (Mendel, 2009, pp. 186—201).

Regulating the integration/inclusion of children with disabilities has become a progressive trend in education in many countries in the recent years. School classes are currently characterized by heterogeneous pupil population. And according to Z. Helus, the modern school is characterized by four basic trends: from selectively discriminating learning to inclusive or integrated learning, from transmissible teaching to teaching as a comprehensive educational care, from authoritative teaching to teaching in the spirit of engaged and committed participation, from closed to open teaching (Helus, 2008, p. 15).

The complexity of implementation of inclusive education in its full scope and the existence of different forms of integration of children with special educational needs into mainstream schools also translates into the terminological apparatus where both terms are often used in

parallel, i.e. “inclusive/integrative” education (for details see: Lechta, ed., 2010, likewise “Integration & Inclusion” in: Hájková, Strnadová, 2010, p. 13). Apart from the above, the very name for students involved in inclusive/integrated education (exceptional students, students with disabilities, students with special educational needs, etc.) is often discussed.

However, it must be emphasized that the legislative documents, financial and material conditions and the interest of children and parents in integrated/inclusive education are all missing its point in a situation where the teachers do not understand its nature, live with prejudice in relation to children with disabilities, do not see the specific care parents provide to their children and lack tolerance and empathy for pupil/human otherness in their value system. The same also applies to prospective teachers and the philosophy (ethos) of the higher education institutions preparing future teachers.

## Future teachers and their university preparation for work with parents of children with special educational needs

The teacher education reform in recent decades gradually paves the way for colleges/universities to respond to the needs arising from teaching experience and enrich their curricula with subjects allowing the students to focus on subjects specifically directed at family and parenting (e.g. family education). From the viewpoint of future professional conduct of prospective teachers, the study of family educational problems allows the future professionals to understand family as a social unit and an object of science. In the context of analyzing the living conditions of families with children with special needs (a clinical family) and in connection with their education, the emphasis is put on the fact that such families and parents require special treatment by teachers. A high degree of professionalism coupled with a deep human understanding and effort to help the parents as much as possible (in cooperation with other professionals) to fulfill their parental roles is also expected. For the children with disabilities, parenting is as difficult as childhood. The difficulties in fulfilling the parental role are mainly associated with securing the material and economic needs of children with disabilities, fulfillment of expectations in the area of culture and education (parents' educational

aspirations and child's level), parents' health status (long-term psychological and physical burden connected with child care, performance of exhausting tasks at work, etc.), psychological maturity and competence of parents in fulfilling their parental role (sometimes present in adolescent parents, their poor intellectual and cultural background, education, personal immaturity — lack of sense of responsibility, etc.). The difficulties in fulfilling the parental role played by the parents of children with disabilities are often manifested in their total exhaustion syndrome and "burn out" in which case they also need to seek help from professionals (Maciarz, 2009, pp. 156—165).

The family issues are to be seen as a theme that permeates special education. We realize that the comprehensive system of deploying integrative/inclusive education is very challenging. V. Hájková and I. Strnadová (2010, pp. 91—92) identified nine main elements in the process. They note that for the educator to become really competent in inclusive education, he/she should receive, among others, specific knowledge and skills to work with the family (*ibidem*, p. 103) in his/her pregraduate preparation. In pedagogical but also inclusive research, the authors emphasize the analysis and measurement of attitudes toward inclusion, e.g. in teachers, parents, pupils in individual school grades, college students, especially those studying at faculties of pedagogy. However, as mentioned by V. Hájková and I. Strnadová, there are several factors of school life and university training which concern the future teachers in their performance of inclusive education (*conf.* pp. 63—87).

We also noted such conclusions in our study of some foreign materials. Michelle L.W. Hsein (2007) recommends to focus on teacher attitudes to inclusion and how graduates of teacher training courses evaluate the level of their college preparation from this perspective. The teacher's inner values and beliefs are at the center of S. Carrington's research (1999). The author focused mainly on the teacher's pedagogical opinion, ideals and implicit theories. S. Carrington, following the research of many other authors, points out that building an inclusive school and the reform of traditional school in this direction must be firmly based on the principles of child-centered education and that it is not enough to prepare the teachers just in terms of knowledge and teaching. The reforms must go hand in hand with the teacher's personal beliefs, values and ideals, as well as beliefs, values and ideals of anyone else involved in creating the inclusive culture. The empirical findings by P. Gill, R. Sherman, C. Sherman (2009) are equally interesting, investigating the effect the personal experience of future teachers with students with disabilities has on their attitudes to inclusive education. Based on the results, the authors state that the personal experiences of future teachers

has a positive impact on their commitment to operate in the environment with pupils with special education needs.

## Some results of empirical research

Based on the previous theoretical considerations, and recognizing the complexity of the issues examined (vis-a-vis our previous investigation), our empirical research was carried out in academic year 2009/2010. The students — future teachers — are considered to be the future bearers of the idea of inclusion/integration. If they are supposed to continue to develop this idea and contribute to increase the number of schools with individually integrated pupils, the students themselves must understand the process of school integration/inclusion, accept its premises and internalize it as a value. Therefore, the idea of inclusion should not remain a mere piece of knowledge; it should be also incorporated into the teacher's "self-concept".

The aim of the research, concluded by T. Turzák under our authorial supervision (doctoral research project, Faculty of Education, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra), was to examine the extent to which the students — future teachers — identify with the idea of integrated/inclusive education, and the teacher's role as a cooperator with the parents of pupils with special educational needs before and after educational intervention. The research was a "quasi-experiment". We conducted a series of five meetings with the students of teacher education programs (survey sample — 88 students) with the aim to provide them with more theoretical and practical findings in the area. Our goal was mainly to ensure personal contact with exceptional families, as well as contact with teachers working with individually integrated pupils. At our seminars, we conducted joint activities such as watching the film *Elizabeth, the story of a deaf-blind girl*, followed by discussion on the story (student reflection), analysis of transcripts of semi-structured interviews with parents of integrated children, analysis of transcripts of semi-structured interviews with teachers in integrated classrooms, personal meetings and conversations with students during seminars for parents of pupils with special educational needs and teachers working in an integrated classroom with pupils during the so-called "observation" or "sit in" teaching practice.

Before the implementation of interventions, we assumed that students would participate in the workshops we designed and they would

have a higher degree of personal involvement in the second set of measurements compared to the first one in terms of their identification with the idea of work in the classroom with integrated pupils. We also assumed that students — future teachers — would assess the importance of parent-teacher cooperation in terms of school integration on a significantly more positive level.

Taking into account the type and nature of research problem, we deemed it necessary to use both quantitative and qualitative analysis. We agree with J. Hendl (2005) who uses a mixed type of research and also highlights a number of advantages of this procedure. These consist mainly of the use of the power and complementarity of the individual approaches and their mutual harmony and concord. Quantitative methods provided us with accurate data. The richness of data obtained by qualitative methods allowed us to supplement and enrich the quantitative results. The results were obtained by administering a self-made questionnaire (before and after intervention), which included questions aimed at evaluation and self-assessment.

In the qualitative method, we were inspired by the methods and techniques for reflective mentoring of students introduced by B. Kasáčová (2005, p. 104) — reflective writing, specific topical writing. Before the first seminar, we had the students write a typed essay on the topic *Me as a teacher in the classroom with integrated students*. After completing all seminars (with targeted content), we had the students perform the same task (essay writing) again.

The results obtained through the questionnaire were analyzed using SPSS 15.0 for Windows. Given our intention to use the mixed type of research and clarify the data, the statistical analysis for the purpose of our study was carried out on a descriptive level.

To process the results qualitatively, we used the method of grounded theory (Strauss, Corbin, 1999). In order to capture as many aspects of the investigated issues as possible and given the need to have full control over the validity of results, we used the method of researcher triangulation in the analytical and interpretation phase (conf. Miovský, 2006, p. 270). Using the multilevel coding of statements and subsequent work with categories (creation of central categories and subcategories, search for relations between categories), this method allowed us to point out those areas that the students considered to be significant (conf. Turzák, 2010).

## Analysis of selected questionnaire results

Before the implementation of interventions, we assumed that students would participate in the workshops we designed and they would have a higher degree of personal involvement in the second set of measurements compared to the first one in terms of their identification with the idea of work in the classroom with integrated pupils. We also expected that after completing the seminars, the students would be more aware of the importance of cooperation with the family and that the quality of undergraduate training would be evaluated more positively in comparison with the pretest. The research results supported our assumptions. Before attending our seminars, only 5% of the students could visualize themselves as *actually* teaching in the classroom with integrated pupils; in the second measurement the number rose to 32%. The option of “not being able” to imagine themselves was completely abandoned (fig. 1, 2).

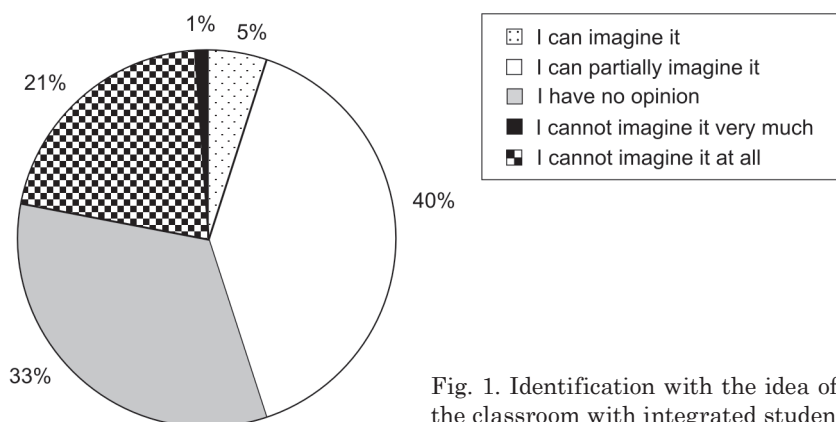


Fig. 1. Identification with the idea of working in the classroom with integrated student (pretest)

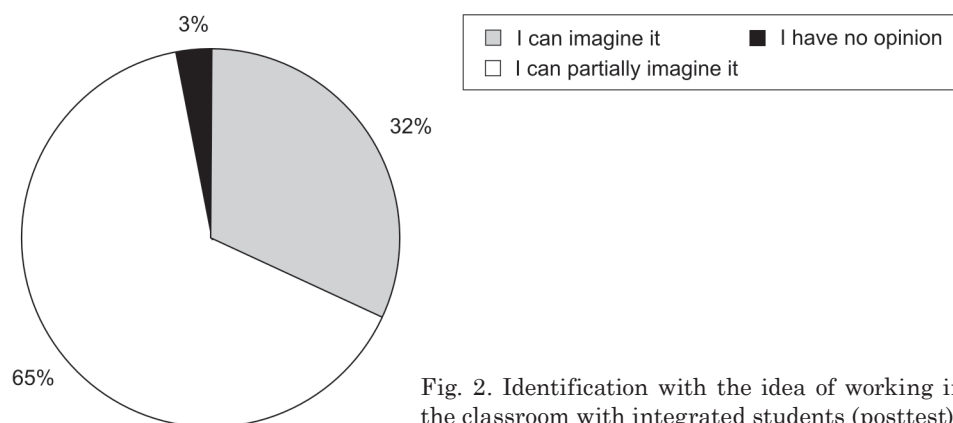


Fig. 2. Identification with the idea of working in the classroom with integrated students (posttest)



Only 13% of students considered the cooperation between schools and families to be important for the success of the whole process of school integration before our intervention, the percent rose to 73% after our intervention fig. 3, 4). No one doubted its importance.

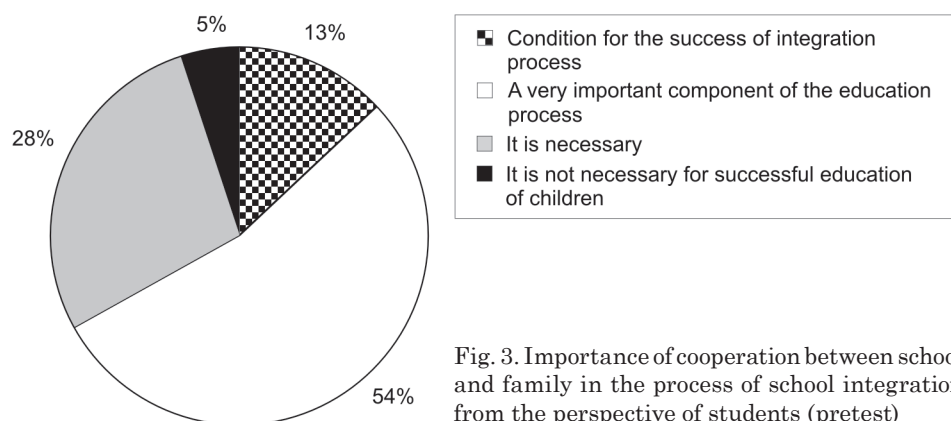


Fig. 3. Importance of cooperation between school and family in the process of school integration from the perspective of students (pretest)

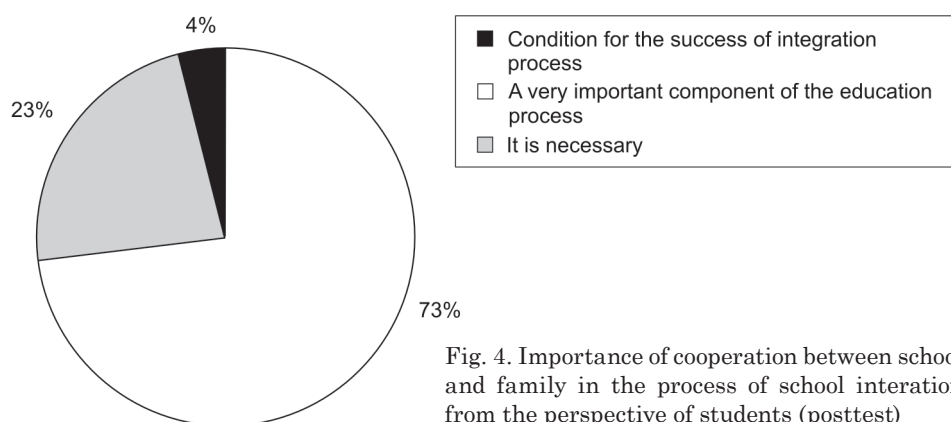


Fig. 4. Importance of cooperation between school and family in the process of school integration from the perspective of students (posttest)

We assumed that the attitude of students in this field is going to be particularly affected by the discussion with parents of pupils with special educational needs integrated into mainstream classes. The discussion with a mother of a child with developmental learning disabilities was assessed by many students as a formative experience. This fact was suggested by the students especially in their essays, which were analyzed with qualitative data processing methods.



## Analysis of students' essays

In further investigation, we focused on the qualitative analysis of student essays on the topic: *Me as a teacher in the classroom with integrated students*. To illustrate the concept, let us have a look at some of the student statements. The students pointed out the complexity of the analyzed field in connection with the requirements on their personal traits: "This work is too demanding, I think it cannot be done by anyone. I still do not have enough determination. I think I lack patience, which is so necessary when working with these children."

It was found that the students' determination to act in an environment with integrated children is influenced by many factors. On the one hand, it is the awareness of the difficulty of ensuring all aspects of this process and, on the other hand, it is the belief in their own capabilities and skills (personal traits). The assessment of students' own personal features for the exercise of the profession is confronted with the idea of an ideal teacher in the classroom with integrated students. The students are aware of their positive personal traits. Their idea of a teacher in the classroom with integrated pupils is, however, in stark contrast to the assessment of their personal features.

Prior to our intervention, the students strongly voiced off in their essays their hitherto theoretical knowledge and practical personal experience (professional training). Their previous preparation was mostly rated by them as inadequate: "I can not imagine having an integrated pupil in class. [...] with the knowledge we have, maybe, a little, but with zero experience with these children and their families, I know this would not be possible." Based on the analysis of the student essays, their personal experience can be identified as one of the most important determinants influencing their perception of working in integrated conditions. The students who met children with special educational needs or their families could mostly imagine themselves as teachers in the classroom with integrated students. "I organize various events and activities for children, carnivals [...] I met children with special needs there. I engaged them in all sorts of activities and their parents were very helpful. I can imagine doing it in class." The process of school inclusion/integration is mainly determined by the amount of personal experience in this area of education.

The results of analysis of student essays supports this finding. The students point at the complexity of work with integrated pupils, but also highlight their current and newly acquired experience (intensity versus commitment).

Meeting the mother of a student with special needs who also professionally helps other parents, was classified by many students as a formative experience that greatly influenced their idea of work in the classroom with integrated students. “Before the discussion I could not imagine what it would be like to have an integrated student in the classroom. What helped me a lot were the analyses of interviews with parents and teachers [...] I can imagine it more clearly after the discussion.”

Teaching in a classroom with integrated pupils was another significant formative experience for the students. In this context, the students highlight the work of teachers in such conditions, seeing in them a model for their future profession: “I admired the teacher in the classroom for her patience with Maroško. She is a role model to me.”

Several students point at the importance of workshops and seminars they attended, emphasizing their practical nature. This is aptly reflected on by one of the students: “At the beginning of the seminars, I could not imagine myself in this role because I lacked information. I especially appreciate the seminar attended by the mother of an integrated child. I think she gave me much more than the theory.”

Thanks to the seminars, the students are also more aware of their shortcomings and limitations. Based on the experience the students gained in the seminars, their idea of integrated learning materialized to the extent that they required additional training and specialized courses for teachers in the field of integrative/inclusive education.

The above-mentioned “clearer idea” of integrated education is one of the most important categories we identified in the analysis after the intervention. It is formed on the basis of the students’ knowledge about themselves and integration, but mainly based on their past experience. The students showed concern about this situation less frequently. They realize that as teachers in the classroom with integrated students, they will not deal with the situation on their own. They have a positive perception of the educational professionals and they emphasize (mainly based on the discussions) the help of parents as one of the key factors. “In the beginning I was afraid of the whole integration process. However, after completing this lesson, I know that as a teacher I will be able to interact with special educators who can advise me on how to help these students and their families effectively.” With the intention of helping a child as much as possible within the available means, the students understand the importance of increased preparation for teaching: “I know that in the future I will be glad to offer my assistance to the child and the family [...] be it by tutoring the student, or creating tools to make his learning easier.”

We are aware of the fact that this initial idea will be influenced by various circumstances in school and private life and it will be modified further.

## Conclusion

We understand that our research sample was small and it does not allow us to generalize the research findings. However, we believe that the presentation of our results broadens the action research in this area and it will be conducive to the common work of university teachers, students, teachers in other grades and parents. It should be kept in mind that “children are placed in the network of developmental conditions. The parents should be at the very heart of the process as the closest persons because they are usually best acquainted with the needs of their children and they are experts in their well-being and health” (Vítková, 2004, p. 34). The professional responsibility for the well-being of children is also shared by the teachers.

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