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Research Insights
Изследователски проникновения

ATTITUDES OF EDUCATIONAL AND PROFESSIONAL STAFF TOWARDS THE WORK OF SUPPORT TEAMS IN PRESCHOOL INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract. The research focuses on analysing the attitudes and opinions of educational and professional staff in preschools regarding the work of school support teams, with an emphasis on their roles and functions at the pre-primary level of the educational system. It is a question of research conducted among specialists in the Slovak Republic. A questionnaire of the researcher‘s own design was used, completed by 83 respondents from 79 preschools. The study confirmed that an essential and extremely important determinant of an inclusive approach to the education of preschool children is the effective work of members of school support teams, particularly special education teachers, not only in relation to children with special educational needs but also in the education of all children.

Keywords: educational and professional staff; inclusive education; preschool; school support team

1. Introduction

Preschools should foster equality by overcoming differences, ensuring equal opportunities for all children, regardless of background, origin, skin colour, social status, or disabilities. Every child has the right to be viewed as an individual, not as an obstacle. The shift towards inclusive education seeks to reduce the number of children placed in separate schools or classes for special needs. Slovakia currently leads Europe in the proportion of children in such settings. To address this, inclusive education must be embraced, tailoring approaches to individual needs. The Slovak education system must move from segregation to inclusion, with diversity as the basis of an inclusive society, promoting equality for all.

Theoretical Starting Point of the Studied Issue

A significant development in implementing inclusive education in Slovakia is the legislative establishment of school support teams in preschools and primary schools. These teams, composed of professionals such as special education teachers, school psychologists, social educators, and speech therapists, collaborate to support children with special educational needs, teachers, and parents. The concept was officially incorporated into Slovak legislation in 2023 through the Act No. 245/2008 Coll. on Education and Act No. 138/2019 Coll. on Pedagogical and Professional Employees. These laws authorise school heads to establish support teams, including a special education teacher and other relevant professionals, to enhance inclusive education. The introduction of school support teams marks a significant step in fostering an inclusive educational framework in Slovakia.

The optimal composition of a school support team includes a special education teacher, field special education teacher, psychologist, school psychologist, social educator, speech therapist, school speech therapist, therapeutic educator, career counsellor, prevention coordinator, class teacher, subject teachers, school club educators, and teaching assistant. Team members collaborate with the legal guardians of children, offering information and strategies to address communication challenges. They monitor the effectiveness of implemented measures and adjust them as necessary. Additionally, the team engages in professional development to enhance pedagogical and professional competencies. They provide a comprehensive understanding of challenges faced by children in at-risk situations and contribute to fostering a positive school climate.

In inclusive education, the special education teacher plays a key role within the school support team. Their main responsibilities include diagnostic activities, offering professional assistance, and providing special educational counselling to children and their legal guardians as part of intervention. They also support teaching staff, collaborate with counselling services, and help develop individual education programmes, especially for children with special educational needs. Current legislation defines children with special educational needs as those diagnosed by counselling services, requiring adjustments in educational conditions, content, methods, and approaches due to health or developmental disadvantages. These adjustments are essential for the child‘s development, ensuring appropriate educational achievement and integration into society1).

A child with special educational needs is defined as: 1. A child with a health disadvantage (including disabilities, illnesses, health impairments, developmental disorders, or behavioural disorders). 2. A child from a socially disadvantaged environment (living in conditions that fail to adequately stimulate mental, emotional, and volitional development, hinder socialisation, and provide insufficient stimuli for personality development). 3. A gifted child (with above-average abilities in intellectual areas, arts, or sports, or one who demonstrates exceptional performance

in these fields). The special education teacher may also engage in direct educational activities to support these children1).

Literature Review

Numerous studies and pedagogical practice show that children in segregated groups often perceive themselves as belonging to a less valued social category, reinforcing societal division. Research suggests that ethnically and socially diverse groups provide a more effective environment for acquiring social and cultural capital than homogeneous ones. Human capital is influenced by interactions with individuals from varied backgrounds, cultures, and social statuses, fostering trust and adherence to rules. The more heterogeneous the group, the better individuals integrate into society. Education plays a crucial role, particularly for children with special educational needs. Preschools are vital for inclusive education, benefiting socially disadvantaged children, those with health impairments, typically developing children, and gifted children. Slovak and international studies support the benefits of inclusive education at this age. The success of inclusive education depends on teaching and professional staff, whose attitudes inform improvements in practice. Special education teachers, integral members of school support teams in preschools, are key to its success.

These findings align with several international studies. Adjei, Osei, Edusei, and Nakua (2024) assessed academic outcomes in low-income countries using databases such as Science Direct, PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar. Their study found that children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds perform poorly in inclusive schools compared to their peers. The authors recommend further research to evaluate the educational outcomes of children with special educational needs and progress in inclusive education, particularly through support from specialists like special education teachers, psychologists, and teaching assistants from preschool age. Similarly, Rubio (2024) conducted research in 104 bilingual preschools and primary schools, identifying a lack of effective measures to address challenges faced by children in early childhood education. Rubio suggests enhancing support teams with specialists in special education and psychology to better assist children with special educational needs.

Hussain and Abdalmajeed (2024) explored the intentions of Saudi Arabian teachers and special educators to implement inclusive education and its impact on their attitudes, self-reflection on support perception, and concerns. The study, involving 125 special and general education teachers, found that teachers‘ self-reflection significantly influenced their intentions to implement inclusive education in regular classrooms. In inclusive education, all children, including those with health impairments, are provided with equal opportunities and respect. Special education teachers play a central role in its implementation. The training of future educators should focus on factors that enhance their knowledge of inclusive education procedures, including teaching strategies, assessment, and curriculum

differentiation, to effectively address challenges in implementing inclusive education.

The study by Ferreira and Reis-Jorge (2023) examined the practices of special education teachers in Portugal regarding the inclusion of children with special educational needs. Conducted with 21 teachers using semi-structured interviews, the qualitative study found that most participants had positive attitudes towards inclusion, highlighting its impact on social relationships rather than knowledge acquisition. Some teachers adapted teaching methods and made the curriculum more flexible to support inclusion. While progress has been made, the study revealed ongoing challenges in inclusive education. There is a need to raise awareness among teachers about its benefits, particularly regarding the flexibility of teaching approaches, with respondents agreeing that inclusion should apply to all children.

The study by Lemoine et al. (2024) assessed the attitudes of 440 teachers and 135 other professionals towards inclusive education, focusing on correlations with teacher status, level of education, and type of disability. Respondents completed a multidimensional attitude scale between January and April 2021. Both groups exhibited similar general attitudes, but in-service teachers showed more positive views towards children with cognitive, sensory, and physical disabilities. The findings highlight strategies to enhance inclusion and well-being for both typically developing children and those with special educational needs.

Kielblock and Woodcock (2023) analysed the attitudes of teachers and educational professionals towards inclusive education, reviewing 225 empirical studies. Their findings indicated that most measurement tools focused on specific groups of children, with no tool being purely inclusive. The authors concluded that a new tool is needed to assess attitudes towards inclusive education for all children. This highlights the need for new methodological approaches. Finnish experts emphasise the importance of lifelong learning for educators in inclusive education, with proper preparation of teachers, special education professionals, and psychologists being essential for quality inclusive practices (Malinen, Savolainen, & Xu, 2012). Research by Brozmanova, Cabanova, and Lynch (2022) confirmed a high self-perception of efficacy in inclusive practices among primary teachers, but applicability to pre-primary educators remains unclear.

Yang, Pang, and Sin (2024), using the Theory of Planned Behavior, examined the impact of 498 teachers in Hong Kong on the competencies of students with special educational needs. They found that teachers‘ attitudes, perceived behavioural control, and subjective norms significantly influenced their intentions regarding inclusive education, affecting student behaviour. The results, consistent across nine types of special educational needs, highlighted the need for supporting positive teacher attitudes and enhancing intentions through professional training and mutual support. Similar findings from researchers in Kosovo (Uka 2024), Germany (Selisko et al. 2024), Portugal (Carvalho et al., 2024), and Greece (Gkouvousi et

al. 2024) emphasised the importance of positive attitudes and support measures by special education teachers.

In 2021, the Methodical-Pedagogical Centre in Bratislava conducted a large survey on the role of helping professions in inclusive education, involving 3,197 respondents. The survey emphasised the importance of school special educators in support teams within preschools (Juščáková et al., 2021). Rochovská et al. (2023a) analysed the attitudes of pedagogical staff based on personal experiences with inclusive education, using a self-constructed questionnaire completed by 284 preschool teachers. The study found no significant difference in attitudes between staff who participated in inclusion support projects and those who did not. Čarnická et al. (2023b) examined preschool educators‘ attitudes towards inclusion and the challenges they face in educating children with special educational needs, collecting data through two questionnaires from the same 284 educators. The study found no correlation between educators‘ reported difficulties and their attitudes towards inclusion, nor any significant relationship between the evaluation of inclusion measures and their attitudes.

Research Issue and Research Questions

The research examined the views of preschool special educators in Slovak kindergartens regarding the effectiveness of their work and the functioning of school support teams. It focused on their attitudes and opinions towards the role of these teams, particularly concerning the position and responsibilities of special educators within the context of inclusive education for children with special educational needs at the pre-primary level.

Based on the analysis of theoretical foundations, field experiences, and the formulated research problem, the following research questions were established: 1. What is the opinion of school special educators regarding collaboration with the parents of preschool children? 2. What is the opinion of school special educators regarding collaboration with the inclusive team of the kindergarten? 3. What is the opinion of school special educators regarding the material and technical conditions of kindergartens? 4. What are the recommendations of school special educators for improving their collaboration with teaching staff and the parents of preschool children?

2. Research Methodology

Sample

The sample for the statistical analysis comprised 83 respondents, all educational and professional staff (81 women) from 79 kindergartens in Slovakia. The sample‘s gender and educational composition reflect typical proportions in the Slovak education sector. Notably, 97.59% of female respondents were aged 30-40 years, representing 42.17% of the total sample. The majority (98.80%) held a second-degree higher education qualification, with 86.75% having less than 10 years of

experience in education. Approximately 50.60% had completed studies in special education. Table 1 presents the respondents‘ characteristics, including gender, age, experience, education, and job positions.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Sample

Age of Respondents		
Age Group	**Absolute Frequency**	**Relative Frequency (%)**
20 – 30 years	19	22.89
30 – 40 years	35	42.17
40 – 50 years	23	27.71
50 – 60 years	5	6.02
60 – 70 years	1	1.20
Years of Experience in Education		
Experience Range	**Absolute Frequency**	**Relative Frequency (%)**
0 – 10 years	72	86.75
10 – 20 years	6	7.23
20 – 30 years	5	6.02
Over 30 years	0	0.00
Highest Level of Education Attained		
Educational Level	**Absolute Frequency**	**Relative Frequency (%)**
Master‘s Degree (2nd level)	82	98.80
Doctorate Degree (3rd level)	1	1.20
Job Position		
Job Position	**Absolute Frequency**	**Relative Frequency (%)**
School Special Educator	41	49.40
Social Educator	38	45.78
Psychologist and School Psychologist	4	4.82
Field of Study (Degree)		
Field of Study	**Absolute Frequency**	**Relative Frequency (%)**

Social Work	27	32.53
Special Education	17	20.48
Special Education and Mental Disability Pedagogy	15	18.07
Social Pedagogy	10	12.05
Teaching Degree + Special Education	8	9.64
Psychology	4	4.82
Psychopedagogy	2	2.41
Total	83	100.00

Instruments and procedures

to explore the views of the respondents, a self-constructed questionnaire titled *attitudes of educational and professional staff towards the work of school support teams in preschools* was used. completed by educational and professional staff from june to september 2023, the questionnaire comprised three sections. the first section gathered identification data (6 items). the second section included two quantitative items assessing collaboration with parents and the school support team, as well as the evaluation of material and technical conditions in preschools. respondents rated these aspects on a scale from 1 (excellent) to 5 (insufficient). the final section contained 14 open-ended questions seeking views and recommendations from the educators.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics (absolute and relative frequencies, mean, standard deviation, and median) were used for data analysis. the chi-square test verified statistically significant differences in responses. a qualitative approach was applied to analyse additional comments from the open-ended section of the questionnaire. open coding and the analytical narrative framework were utilised to process these responses, addressing the research questions.

3. Research results

in the first section of the questionnaire, the respondents provided their views on the collaboration between the educational and professional staff and other participants in the educational process. the results are presented in table 2.

Table 2. Collaboration of the Educational and Professional Staff within the School

Evaluation of Collaboration as Educational and Profesional Staff					
Collaboration with	**1 – Excellent (%)**	**2 – Very Good (%)**	**3 – Good (%)**	**4 – Satisfactory (%)**	**5 – Insufficient (%)**
Children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds	65.06	30.12	4.82	0.00	0.00
All children in the school	57.83	38.55	3.61	0.00	0.00
Kindergarten principals	66.27	20.48	8.43	3.61	1.20
Teaching staff	62.65	21.69	12.05	2.41	1.20
Parents of children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds	36.14	40.96	15.66	4.82	2.41
Parents of all children in the school	31.33	46.99	16.87	4.82	0.00
Descriptive Statistics					
Collaboration with	**Mean**	**Median**	**Mode / Mode Frequency**	**Standard Deviation**	**Coefficient of Variation (%)**
Children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds	1.40	1	1 / 54	0.58	41.47%
All children in the school	1.46	1	1 / 48	0.57	38.83%
Kindergarten principals	1.53	1	1 / 55	0.88	57.69%
Teaching staff	1.58	1	1 / 52	0.88	55.74%
Parents of children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds	1.96	2	2 / 34	0.96	49.01%
Parents of all children in the school	1.95	2	2 / 39	0.82	42.01%

Table 2 presents the research findings on the collaboration of educational and professional staff with children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds

and all children. The results show that no respondent rated this collaboration as unsatisfactory or insufficient. In contrast, 95.18% of respondents rated it as very good to excellent. Collaboration with kindergarten principals was also positively assessed, with 86.75% rating it as excellent or very good. Collaboration with teaching staff was similarly rated, with 84.34% marking it as very good or excellent. Regarding cooperation with parents, there was no significant difference between those of children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (77.10% rated it very good or excellent) and all parents (78.32%). Only 2.41% of respondents rated the collaboration as insufficient.

In the second section of the questionnaire, respondents evaluated the material and technical conditions of the kindergartens (e.g. office space, educational materials, room for group activities, etc.).

Table 3. Material and Technical Conditions of the Kindergarten Assessed by the Respondents

Rating	n	%	Mean	Median	Mode / Mode Frequency	Standard Deviation	Coefficient of Variation (%)
1 – Satisfactory	34	40.96	2.11	2	1 / 34	1.16	55.10%
2	21	25.30					
3	16	19.28					
4	9	10.84					
5 – Unsatisfactory	3	3.61					
Total	83	100					

Table 3 presents the statements of educational and professional staff regarding material and technical conditions in kindergartens, assessed using an interval scale (1 = satisfactory; 5 = unsatisfactory). For 40.96% of respondents, the conditions were satisfactory, while 25.30% found them slightly or less satisfactory. For 19.28%, the conditions were somewhat satisfactory, and 10.84% rated them below average. 3.61% considered them unsatisfactory. This indicates that approximately 15% of respondents do not have adequate conditions for effective work.

The final section of the questionnaire included 14 open-ended items, gathering educational and professional staff members‘ opinions and recommendations on their work and cooperation with teaching staff and parents. A qualitative approach was used to analyse these responses, employing open coding and the construction of an analytical framework (in the part Discussion) to process the additional statements from respondents.

Table 4. Opinions and Recommendations of Educational and Professional Staff on Their Activities and Cooperation with Pedagogical Staff and Legal Representatives of Kindergarten Children

Activities	The specific activities that the staff member actually carries out in the school	• The initial and final screening diagnostics. • Support for children in daily educational activities. • Regular stimulation of children's problematic areas. • Consultations with the pedagogical staff of the kindergarten. • Consultations with the legal guardians of the children in the kindergarten. • Assistance in organising various activities of the kindergarten.
	Activities that contribute to an inclusive school environment	• Collaboration with the supportive school/inclusive team of the kindergarten. • Equal access for all children in the kindergarten. • Collaboration with the legal guardians of the children in the kindergarten. • Cooperation with the primary school. • Collaboration with the municipality and the community centre. • Creating a non-discriminatory environment.
	Opinions on the most important activities in the work of a school special educator or professional staff member	• Quality orientation diagnostics and stimulation of kindergarten children. • Creation of a safe environment in which every child will be accepted. • Collaboration with the management of the kindergarten, educators, and parents. • Suitable spatial conditions for individual work with the child. • Preparation of children for successful primary education in primary school.
	Arguments in favour of introducing the position of school special educator at school	• Effective work with children within daily stimulation. Individual approach. • Easing the adaptation of children to the new environment in kindergarten. • Early identification of problematic areas in preschool children. • Participation in creating a positive working climate. • Better preparedness of children for entry into primary school.

Advantages and strengths	Benefits associated with the employment of a school special educator in kindergarten (self-reflection)	• Support in the area of school readiness for children entering primary education. • Division of tasks among the members of the school support/inclusive team in the kindergarten contributes to the effective use of working time. • Improvement of kindergarten children's outcomes. • Bridging the gap between socially disadvantaged children and typically developing children. • Holistic development of children. • Individual work with children with special educational needs.
	Achievements of the school special educator or professional staff member (self-reflection)	• Improvement of all children's readiness for entry into primary school. • Creation of a school support/inclusive team in the kindergarten. • Positive feedback from primary school teachers. • Positive feedback from the parents of kindergarten children. • High-quality collaboration between the school special educator and the teaching staff of the kindergarten. • Significant progress of children in the area of inclusive education.
	Strengths of cooperation with children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds	• Basic knowledge of the Romani language. • Individual support for kindergarten children. • Positive motivation for children to achieve better results in various areas. • Equal approach to all children in the kindergarten. • Strengthening the self-confidence of all children, particularly those with special educational needs. • Acquisition of new information about their community.
	Strengths of cooperation with children's parents	• Parental interest in information related to the educational progress of their children. • Parental joy in their children's achievements. • Close and intensive cooperation between members of the school support/inclusive team and the families of the children. • Motivation for parents to enrol their children in kindergarten.

	Strengths of cooperation with the principal, teachers and teaching staff of the kindergarten	• The shared interest of all members of the school support/inclusive team towards the positive progress of each child in the kindergarten. • Excellent cooperation with the headteachers of the kindergartens. • Excellent collaboration with the class teachers and teaching assistants. • Joint sharing of information among educational staff regarding the progress or potential problems of each child in the kindergarten. • The involvement of all members of the school support/inclusive team in creating a positive workplace climate.
Disadvantages and weaknesses	The most frequently solved difficulties (problems) of children	• High illness rates among children. Irregular attendance at kindergarten. • Lack of knowledge of the Slovak language. • Behavioural problems in children. • Food refusal. • Poor hygiene among children and the occurrence of pediculosis.
	Deficiencies related to the employment of a school special educator or professional staff member	• Fixed-term employment only. • No deficiencies, rather benefits. • Inadequate spatial conditions. • Poor awareness among members of the school support/inclusive team regarding the job responsibilities of the special education teacher in kindergarten. • Insufficient space for individual work with children.
Suggestions and proposals	Suggested further training topics of interest to staff	• Managing stressful situations in kindergarten. • Basics of the Romani language. • School readiness. Impaired communication skills. • Autism. • Adaptation of children to the kindergarten environment. Problematic behaviour. • Activities of the school support team in kindergarten. • Creation of an individual educational programme.

Suggestions and proposals	Suggestions for improving the work of the school special educator or professional staff member	• Webinars, workshops, and meetings with foreign special educators and experts in the field. • Appropriate spatial and material-technical conditions. • Proper cooperation with all members of the kindergarten's inclusive team. • Media coverage of best practice examples. • Financial resources to stabilise the position of the school special educator in the kindergarten even after the completion of the projects.
	Further comments on the issue	• Stabilise and support the position of the school special educator in the kindergarten. • The departure of members of the school support team in the kindergarten (school special educator and teaching assistant) will worsen children's attendance at the kindergarten and jeopardise their preparation for a successful transition to primary school. • Create school support/inclusive teams in all kindergartens and primary schools.

Discussion

The first research item assessed the collaboration of educational and professional staff with children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and with all children. The results revealed that none of the respondents rated this collaboration as satisfactory or inadequate, with 95.18% evaluating it as very good or excellent. Cooperation with preschool directors was similarly praised, with 86.75% rating it as excellent or very good. Collaboration with preschool teaching staff also received positive feedback, with 84.34% rating it highly. There was no significant difference in the cooperation with parents of children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (77.10%) and parents of all children (78.32%), with only 2.41% rating it as inadequate.

In the second questionnaire item, respondents (school special educators) assessed the material and technical conditions in preschools. 40.96% rated them satisfactory, 25.30% moderately satisfactory, and 19.28% partially satisfactory. 10.84% found the conditions substandard, while 3.61% considered them unsatisfactory. These results suggest that approximately 15% of respondents face inadequate conditions for quality work.

The final section of the questionnaire consisted of 14 open-ended items asking educational and professional staff for their opinions and recommendations on their activities and collaboration with preschool staff and legal guardians. A qualitative approach was used to analyse the responses, revealing an understanding

of the challenges faced by school special educators in preschools. These insights are valuable for researchers, practitioners, and legal guardians of both typically developing children and those with special educational needs. The findings highlighted several necessary measures to improve the role of school special educators and their collaboration in preschool settings:

– It is essential to stabilise and financially support the position of educational and professional staff within every preschool.

– Conditions should be established to facilitate their ongoing professional development, taking into account the specific needs and characteristics of preschool children.

The responsibilities and tasks of educational and professional staff include contributing to the creation of an inclusive climate in preschools;

– conducting entry and exit screening diagnostics and stimulation for children aged 3 – 4 and 5 – 6;

– ensuring an individualised approach for children with special educational needs;

– promoting equal access for all children in the preschool; collaborating with parents to support the stimulation of children;

– assisting in the adaptation of children to the new school environment;

– cooperating with preschool management, teachers, and teaching assistants;

– providing advice and feedback to class teachers on diagnostic outcomes and the stimulation process;

– offering guidance and feedback to parents regarding the diagnostics and stimulation of their children;

– enhancing and strengthening collaboration between preschools and specialists in school counselling centres;

– sharing the results of screening diagnostics with specialists in counselling and prevention centres, thereby contributing to more precise professional diagnoses of children with special educational needs;

– addressing disparities between socially disadvantaged children and typically developing children;

– ensuring that, upon employment, members of the school support/inclusive team are informed about the roles and responsibilities of the school special educator in the preschool setting;

– working with other members of the preschool support/inclusive team to facilitate the successful transition of children to primary education;

– supporting the self-esteem of all children, particularly those with special educational needs, in collaboration with the school/inclusive team;

– participating in the creation of individual educational programmes for children with special educational needs; and fostering a safe and accepting environment for every child in the preschool.

Conclusions

The research findings reflect the views of school special educators on inclusive education in Slovak preschools. Respondents noted that school support teams positively influence children‘s development and enhance collaboration with preschool directors, staff, and parents. The material and technical resources in preschools were also positively assessed in the context of inclusive education. The study, conducted among specialists in the Slovak Republic, confirmed that, according to school special educators, the effective functioning of school support team members is a critical factor in ensuring successful inclusive education for preschool children.

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NOTES

1. Act No. 245/2008 Coll. on Education.
2. Act No. 138/2019 Coll. on Pedagogical and Professional Employees.

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