

# PUPILS WITH MILD INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES IN INCLUSION EDUCATION

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**Abstract:** *In the last decade, there has been a trend toward the inclusion of pupils with SEN, pupils with mild intellectual disabilities into mainstream schools. A specific feature of the approaches used in educating pupils with MID is the acquisition of key competencies – the preparation of pupils with mild intellectual disabilities (MID) for everyday life. The aim of the research was to describe the factors and support measures which affect the process of integration/inclusion of pupils with mild intellectual disabilities into primary schools in the city of Brno and Vyškov. In-depth qualitative interviews based on the phenomenological paradigm were used, as well as semi-structured interviews methodologically inspired by the grounded theory approach (Strauss, A., Corbinová, J 1999). The research results confirm that a foundation of lesson procedures is the adherence to support measures: the role of the assistant teacher, an individual education plan, personal development plan, individual approach, special methods and forms of work.*

**Key words:** *education, inclusion, support measures, teacher, pupil with mild intellectual disabilities, qualitative research, teaching strategies, school environment.*

## Introduction

The education of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream schools is one of the most important tasks and challenges for future education policies in both domestic and international contexts. Inclusive education is based on the legal provisions of the UN, UNESCO, Salamanca Statement (1994). But the question remains: What do we call the values of inclusion and individuality? A partial answer to this question may be some of the key aspects of education. The first aspect is correct diagnosis; determining whether there are special educational needs or not. Furthermore, there is the structure of the curriculum – namely, how necessary it is to specialize the curriculum of a regular educational program.

An inclusive education is understood to be an education that develops the culture of the school towards social coherence, and inclusion is understood to mean the arrange-

ment of a normal school in a way which can offer an adequate education to all children (pupils and students) with regard to their individual differences and with respect to their current educational needs regardless of the type of “*special*” needs or of the results of a comparison of pupils’ performance (www.msmt.cz). In the past decade, there has been a notable trend toward the inclusion of pupils with SEN who had previously attended special schools. The inclusion of pupils with learning difficulties (MID) has been undertaken in the USA. Some of the studies conducted abroad between 2002 and 2003 point to a decline in pupils with learning difficulties (MID) in segregated special education from 54 % to 43 % (Norwich, B., Kelly, N. 2005).

An intellectual disability poses a significant limitation in the functionality of an individual. It is characterized by a significant reduction in intellectual abilities and exists concurrently with limitations in two or more skill areas such as communication, self-maintenance, family life, self-control, health and safety, education, leisure and work. The active molding of the personality of a pupil with an intellectual disability depends on how the support systems work, how stimulating the environment is for the teacher’s creativity, the experience of the individual, personal factors (e.g. what are the cultural connections with the strategies or patterns of behavior) and what skills the pupil possesses. The aim of teaching is to create a teaching environment that is necessary for life and leads to the greatest possible independence and self-sufficiency. To do this, it is necessary to differentiate and didactically adapt the educational content. The most effective teaching methods used with pupils in mainstream schools are also the teaching methods used with pupils with mild intellectual disabilities. Teachers of both groups of pupils make use of such measures in order to make it as easy as possible to educate students with mild intellectual disabilities, modifying the various methods according to the individual.

A specific feature of the approaches used in educating pupils with MID is the acquisition of key competencies – the preparation of pupils with mild intellectual disabilities (MID) for everyday life. Strategies aimed at the ability to receive and impart information through symbolic or non-symbolic communication (communication skills), teach pupils to be perceptive of their strengths and limitations, be aware of their interests, and be able to recognize and accept their own need for support (personal skills). An important strategy is the ability to lead students toward deepening their knowledge and skills in certain areas (objective skills), to acquire learning methods and master the ways of work organization (methodological skills). The planning of inclusive learning in a classroom or school assumes that consideration of the additional individual support measures of the pupils concerned is being taken. This means that an individual model cannot exist without a social model, just as a social model must reflect the individual conditions. It is not possible to determine the individual needs and arrangements for the pupil unless we take into account how capable the community is in responding to the differentness of the pupil (Henley, M., Ramsey, R., Algozzine, F.).

We can consider the analysis and evaluation of the procedures used in teaching and the ability to describe and re-use them as key skills of an inclusive educator.

An educator in an inclusive school is no longer someone who directs the lesson – they become more of a facilitator in a pupil’s learning and development, a guide, a mentor, and a partner in dialogue and discussion. They focus on finding new teaching

methods, their effectiveness and evaluation. An inclusive school applies *internally individualized learning methods* and monitors *the individualized teaching goals*. Ex cathedra teaching recedes into the background and *cooperation and differentiation in education* prevail (Hájková, V., Strnadová, I. 2010).

If inclusion is to be carried out as it has over the past twenty years, the group of pupils with learning disabilities (pupils with MID) presents a difficult test for the inclusion. An additional subject of our research was the mapping of the state of educating pupils with MID within inclusion conditions within primary education.

## **Description of research methods and the research**

Research was carried out following qualitative research methods. The aim of the research was to describe the factors and support measures which affect the process of integration/inclusion of pupils with mild intellectual disabilities into primary schools in the city of Brno and the Vyškov region. The research determined to what extent the individual measures are being by teachers. A substantial part of the research also included a combination and confrontation of the points of view held by persons involved. In this particular research, the involved persons were mainly teachers, pupils and their parents.

In order to meet the objectives while also taking into account the nature of the subsequent specified research questions, a combination of two qualitative techniques was chosen. Both *in-depth interviews* based on the phenomenological paradigm and *semi-structured interviews* methodologically inspired by the *grounded theory* approach were used in the research (Strauss, A., Corbin, J. 1999). For the qualitative analysis, we formulated research questions proceeding from the most general and very broad questions to very specific ones. The most general research questions (and research objectives) were divided into several broader sections:

- 1) *The significance of the disability in connotation to teachers and pupils*
- 2) *The individual needs of pupils with an MID*
- 3) *The approaches and skills applied by teachers towards pupils with mild intellectual disabilities*
- 4) *Confrontation of the viewpoints of teachers, pupils and parents*

Emphasis was placed on gathering as wide a range of approaches to inclusive education as possible, on their categorization and their placement into context with other statements of involved persons. We were interested in the capability of co-operating, the application of specific approaches to the educational process, assuring conditions, the form of evaluation and the use of an assistant teacher in the classroom. The potential of phenomenological research was used to confront the points of view of three surveyed groups of respondents. This part of the research showed where their perceptions are similar and where they are different. How the respondents perceive the situation of a pupil with an MID, what the problematic areas are, and areas with hidden potential.

The research sample included respondents from three involved groups: **teachers**, **parents**, and **pupils with an MID**. The key group for the research were the students with an MID themselves. In addition to them, however, is the interrelationship of teachers from integrating schools of Brno and Vyškov and the parents of the interviewed pupils.

The research sample was in the interest of the answers to all of the research questions. Such diversity is very important for a *triangulation of results*. Triangulation ensures a diversity of viewpoints to the researched issues without being dependent upon any philosophical approach. It shows a diversity of viewpoints and the influence of the situation on the testimonies (Šafaříček, R., Šed'ová, K. 2007). The greatest emphasis, however, was given to interviews with teachers.

The tool used for the collection and creation of data for the qualitative depth interviews with representatives of the target populations were *interview scenarios*. The subject matter of the interview was largely determined by the respondent. Interviews were recorded using audio-visual devices and then transcribed and analyzed. The length of an interview was between 45-60 minutes. Through *open coding* we identified the basic concepts of the analyzed interviews and created the primary key categories. Each category basically represented a sub-theme, which was a subject of conversation.

Nine interviews were carried out with teachers (they were all teachers who had agreed to take part in the research and who work with an integrated pupil with an MID in their class), 2 interviews with pupils with an MID, and 1 conversation with their parents. In that chapter we will present only the results of the research conducted with teachers of integrated pupils with an MID in mainstream schools.

The qualitative analysis was carried out in the *grounded theory* paradigm. On the basis of this analysis we searched for basic *research categories* with the aid of *open coding*. This was followed by an *axial coding* technique that puts into context the various categories and subcategories and acts as a tool for sorting data (Šafaříček, R., Šed'ová, K. 2007). Among **the basic categories** were the *system framework of education (1)*, the *category view of the pupil (2)*, *category role of the actors (3)*, and *category specific approaches to teaching (4)*.

Within the **first category (1)**, we focused on the system of education of pupils with MID. Some of the schools that participated in the research had developed a separate educational program based on the FEP PE (Framework Education Program for Primary Education) – an appendix defining the education of pupils with MID (in cases with a larger number of integrated pupils at the school). Another option was to create an individual education plan based on the FEP PE – Appendix MID. In these cases, pupils also had their own personal development plans. An individualized education plan (IEP) contains the principles essential for teachers making decisions. Such decisions need to include tasks that are clear and understandable to pupils, teachers and parents. An IEP should be prepared in a way that makes it easier for the teacher to run lessons and, primarily, plan the lessons – not vice versa (e.g. specific supporting goals are defined). Such a plan was the result of the mutual co-operation of the teacher, a special pedagogical center (SPC) with a supervisory role over correctness, and a parent that would acknowledge the completion of their child's tasks with their signature.

The **second category (2)** involved an insight into the evaluation of the pupils' level, their special needs, and identifying the extent of their ability to get engaged (integrate) with the collective of the class and school. Intellect was perceived by the informants (teachers) as a basic feature that is essential to doing well within the educational process. The distinguishing question is whether the “pupil can do it”, or “not”. A reduced intellect places the pupil in an inferior position at all levels – although IQ is only

one of many aspects of mental activity. Teachers applied a system of hierarchization and nearly always expected that such a student would do worse than others, and when a pupil with an MID stood out in something over the rest of the class, teachers often viewed it as surprising.

Most of the time, integrated pupils with an MID were mentioned as having problems with more general operations – generalizations, categorizing, imprinting into memory. This aspect is also related to frequent loss of attention and memory deficit, which, in particular, has an impact on success in learning. Classic psychological research has shown that random strings of symbols without any mutual correlation are far more problematic to remember than any content in which a certain internal logic can be both observed and recollected from memory based on such a system. In addition, the ability to learn materials that are understood well by other pupils and considered to be systematic are, according to the informants, more difficult to acquire for pupils with lower intellect. It is often seen by them as an illogical sequence of information, thus making the learning process less efficient. Among other aspects of the pupils' disabilities were speech impairments, especially when pronouncing more complex expressions. Another aspect, of course, is a more limited vocabulary – whose extent, however, was often connected to a lack of stimulation within the social environment some of the pupils lived in.

Another of the *categories* (3) was the specific aspects of approaches in the educational process. In connection with a limited ability to generalize and link different content was frequently mentioned the need for an illustrative interpretation of the curriculum. Teachers also mentioned measures necessary for sustaining attention, which pupils with an MID is very scattered. They tend to lose attention especially during longer presentations of the curriculum. As a result, it is impossible for the teacher to meaningfully differentiate individual conventional phases of the lesson procedure. Furthermore, all of the interviews have shown that an emphasis has been given to illustration and tactile-kinesthetic activities in various forms. The fulfillment of this specific need was a result of teachers' efforts to help pupils overcome their deficits in the area of more general logical operations; their inability to order things is replaced by physical manipulation and making connections. The use of such techniques is suitable mainly for the practice of operations that cannot be connected through logical processes (counting and multiplication) and that require mechanical memorization. The question is how to overcome the deficit when more complex logical content is concerned, such as in the fields of the natural sciences and the history and geography of one's own country. In addition to illustration and frequent changes in lessons, pupils with MID also need more specific and clearer instructions than others. Teacher's help and advice are necessary to make sure that pupils are doing the task they are supposed to and that they are doing the task correctly. Joining the collective was not viewed by any of the pupils as a problem. The other pupils were generally made familiar with the issue of the disability of the integrated pupil and their relationship to the pupil was more protective than conflictive. It is also significant that the pupils with an MID that were discussed in the research had no behavioral problems. Instead, they were rather quiet, sometimes even slow or apathetic. Since pupils with an MID were not seen as competition by the other pupils, they often got into protected positions and were cared for by their classmates.

On the other hand, some teachers question the sense of integration. Although the

relationships in the collective are not a problem, a significant difference while trying to integrate (especially at upper primary school) rather inhibits the personal development of a pupil. If the pupil is significantly below the average of the class, they experience systematic feelings of difference and inadequacy they would not have were they in a pool of children at a similar level.

### **The dilemma of integrating into a regular class**

On the one hand, there is the motivation to integrate the pupil into the collective, enabling them to compare themselves with others and to self-reflect, which is derived from a normal group. On the other hand, the pupil's experience from integration into a normal class is often problematic because they see their difference. Problems are not usually mentioned in relation to accepting the pupil by the collective. On the contrary, in all of the interviews a positive attitude toward the pupil has been strongly emphasized. On the other hand, however, the interviews showed a latent phenomenon of students with an MID as diversifying and making the school environment more interesting for other students. Although their attitude is positive, the integrated pupil is relegated to the role of someone to help and care for.

### **The dilemma of cooperation with parents**

Although cooperation with parents was evaluated as positive and trouble-free in most interviews, there was also a latent conflict between parents and the school about requirements that a child could manage to complete. There is the particular school, teachers and in some cases a special pedagogical center with their own experience from various cases of integration on one side, and on the other side are parents who have detailed knowledge about their child and who are the most motivated to support them. The contradiction is apparent when teachers talk about the fact that parents refuse to place their child at a different type of school, although the teachers themselves view the integration process within a regular primary school as something pointless.

Another aspect of cooperation is given by the social status of the parents. So far, the interviews have shown that it is possible to distinguish two types of parents that stand out more significantly as far as feedback on the dynamics of coping with MID within the family is concerned. The first type is socially weak parents. The second type is mobilized parents, usually from higher educational levels. The family environment with the first group is not very stimulating, the pupil is not being developed, and their willingness to co-operate is quite low. The second group of parents, on the other hand, are mobilized by the MID of their child and they become "expert parents" who integrate the care of their child into their life plan. Both groups, however, are similar in the fact that they want their child to participate at the highest level of education possible (the level that is actually beneficial to the child may be, however, subject to conflict with other parties).

The following subcategory (3) was related to co-operation with other teachers, with a special pedagogical center (SPC), and other institutions. Co-operation among teachers was more effective at lower primary school levels. At upper primary school levels, co-operation with an assistant was more prevalent than among the teachers themselves. Co-operation with an SPC was carried out at three levels: negotiating a claim for an assistant, consulting and training activities, and counseling work in specific cases. The first two areas were noted as trouble-free. Co-operation on specific cases (and mainly the participation of SPC representatives) took place only marginally within the class, and sometimes differently than what the teachers would have expected. Not all pupils discussed in the interviews were recommended to have an assistant teacher. The assistant teacher's role was mentioned mainly in reference to balancing the pace and requirements of the curriculum at a regular school. Integration is often possible only with the use of an assistant who helps the pupil when they significantly lag behind the normal pace of a lesson. Sometimes it is the assistant who takes over the major role not only in communication with the pupil, but also in planning the pupil's development and estimating their abilities.

*The last category* (4) included the particulars in education and the application of support measures. The general organization of a lesson is influenced by the use of assistance. Thus a teacher may afford to slightly exceed the pace of a pupil with an MID because they know that, thanks the assistant, the pupil will not get lost in the flow of information.

### **The dilemma of lesson organization**

Pupils with an MID are often very rigid in their approach to change; it takes them longer to adapt and get used to something. Paradoxically, it is those pupils going through integration with an increased burden that attend part of the subject outside of their class. They are faced with the need to alternate groups, which would be a burden to even pupils without an MID. On the other hand, it actually provides a positive aspect, which lies in the fact that they get used to change, which is something they will have to cope with throughout their entire lives.

Teachers place an emphasis on the need to more closely monitor the completion of tasks and the systemization of common activities. The general direction of the lesson is related to the specific needs mentioned by teachers in the previous parts of the interviews. Illustrative and tactile-kinesthetic activities often required non-standard aids that were not yet commonly available, and teachers had to improvise or manufacture their own teaching aids; they used aids (textbooks) of both special and normal primary schools. During the lesson, teachers put great emphasis on differentiation and cooperation (group work) and take advantage of alternative approaches and elements of therapy (art therapy, music therapy).

An important part of the educational process is evaluation. During evaluation teachers often cite self-consciousness as they evaluate integrated pupils. Verbal assessment is used only for some of them and giving grades evokes the same scale of grades as with the other pupils, which is, however, perceived as problematic. Performance was

evaluated according to the level of knowledge of the curriculum of a special primary school. Parents often did not want verbal evaluations and preferred grades.

### **The dilemma of evaluation**

Pupils with MID are assessed differently than other pupils in the classroom, yet still at the same scale of grades. This raises questions or concerns of other students with which the teacher has to cope with. On the one hand, it has been mentioned that it is important to have the same evaluation scale for a pupil with an MID and the others (pupils with an MID often request it themselves). On the other hand, it is often clear to the other pupils that they are marked according to other criteria.

## **Conclusion**

An intellectual disability is associated with limited intellectual or cognitive functions that can impair learning and the acquiring of new knowledge. Pupils with an MID have various educational needs and various opportunities. The aims at of teaching students with an MID are focused on securing, extending and modifying the existing competencies of the pupil. In order to motivate them, broaden their knowledge, behavior and conduct, those objectives (based on the pupils' interests) are individualized and differentiated. They should motivate them in such a way that they become aware on their own of their strengths.

Integrated learning of pupils with and without disabilities is a mutual task for all schools, as it is protected by school legal documents. We must realize that integrated education is not the opposite pole nor structural alternative to the existence of special schools, but rather an integral part of the school profile. It consists of creating learning situations that take into account individual learning opportunities and the needs of all pupils involved, as well as to bring them into a mutual learning process. A lesson procedure such as this is possible in a team of teachers. The team should discuss, plan, implement and reflect upon their lesson procedures through a permanent information exchange depending on the specific topics and learning objectives of particular fields.

On the basis of the research results, we have confirmed that the foundation of education is the adherence to support measures: *the role of the assistant teacher, an individual education plan, personal development plan, individual approach, special methods and forms of work*. Teachers must have certain skills in understanding pupils: for example, be able to perceive themselves and others, identify strengths and weaknesses and know how to manage and use them, be capable of self-evaluation and of assessing others, create communication situations with various partners and be able to reflect upon them, and further develop mutually agreed upon arrangements and be able to carry them through. Working together cooperatively is a condition for success.

Parents are also an important factor. Parents usually observe the development, abilities and educational needs of their children from a different perspective than te-



achers. Many parents go through a lot of stress during the upbringing of their child. Keeping each other informed about the child's evaluation, listening attentively, empathy, an understanding attitude, a realistic perspective on what is being done, and the acceptance of limits and valid critiques are among the invaluable skills required for cooperation between parents and teachers.

At present, however, there is not yet enough experience in methodology and didactics for joint teaching. It is therefore necessary that integration in lesson procedures be given extra support through counseling, reflection and further education.

## Literature

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## ŽÁCI S LEHKÝM MENTÁLNÍM POSTIŽENÍM V INKLUZIVNÍM VDĚLÁVÁNÍ

**Abstrakt:** V posledních deseti letech je patrný trend inkluze žáků se SVP, žáků s lehkým mentálním postižením do škol hlavního vzdělávacího proudu. Specifikou přístupů v edukaci žáků s LMP je osvojení si klíčových kompetencí, příprava žáka s lehkým mentálním postižením (LMP) na konkrétní každodenní život. Cílem výzkumného šetření bylo popsat faktory a podpůrná opatření, ovlivňující proces integrace/inkluze žáků s lehkým mentálním postižením v základních školách v Brně městě a Vyškově. Bylo využito kvalitativních hloubkových rozhovorů vycházejících z fenomenologického paradigmatu a polostrukturované rozhovory metodologicky inspirované přístupem zakotvené teorie (Strauss, A., Corbinová, J 1999). Na základě výsledků výzkumu se

nám potvrdilo, že základem vyučování je dodržování podpůrných opatření: funkce asistenta pedagoga, individuální vzdělávací plán, plán osobního rozvoje, individuální přístup, speciální metody a formy práce.

**Klíčová slova:** vzdělávání, inkluze, podpůrná opatření, pedagog, žák s lehkým mentálním postižením, kvalitativní výzkum, učební strategie, školní prostředí.