

# The Role of the Educational Counsellor in Meeting Special Education Needs (SEN) in Primary Schools of Prague, Czechoslovakia

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## Abstract

*The movement for inclusive education has produced various innovations. One of this is special services coordinators (SENCOs) in the mainstream schools. When the schools start accepting children with special education needs, it becomes necessary to give someone with special training and knowledge the responsibility to look after these children in the mainstream schools. In the Czech Republic, the Educational Counsellors (Výchovný Poradce) were given this coordination responsibility by legislation. The present study explores the role of the Educational or Pedagogic Counsellor in relation to the children with special education needs, as this is stated in legislation and practiced in reality. The research also investigates the challenges the Educational Counsellors face and how they cope with the challenges. Data were collected for the study from 26 participants including teachers, educational counsellor, special educators and parents through interviews, questionnaire and focus group discussion. As an exploratory research, a sequential mixed method design was applied for data collection and analysis. The findings show that responsibility for serving children with special education needs is a team effort with the Educational Counsellor being a member of the team, playing a lead role. It was found that as Czech schools employed special education teachers in the mainstream schools, Educational Counsellors were not involved directly in education of children with disability. The Counsellor, holding a senior position in the education hierarchy, had the overall responsibility for integration and coordination of a number of related matters including school absenteeism, "social-pathological phenomena," facilitating services for children with disability, and integration into school of children from ethnic groups. The conclusion included suggestions regarding the relevance of the the Czech experience for Bangladesh.*

**Key Words:** Inclusive Education, Pedagogical Counsellor (Výchovný Poradce), Special Education Needs (SEN)

## I. Introduction

The movement for inclusive education has produced various innovations. One of these is the role of special services coordinators (SENCOs) in the mainstream schools. When the

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schools started accepting children with special education needs, it became necessary to assign someone with special training and knowledge the task of looking after these children in the mainstream schools. Positions such as the remedial teacher, the itinerant teacher, the special teacher and then the Special Education Needs Coordinator (SENCo) have been created to support the children with special education needs in mainstream schools (Crowther et al, 2001). These roles primarily have been evolving to support the individual child; but with the notion of inclusion getting wider acceptance, they have begun to take lead in the inclusion movement within the school system (Gerschel, 2005; Layton, 2005). Along with classroom teaching, these teachers are required to assume responsibility for coordinating different activities for supporting the child with special needs, such as, guiding parents, helping classroom teachers, and organising sessions with itinerant/peripatetic teachers and other specialists. They are also responsible for capacity building of the schools in responding to children with special needs.

The diverse roles and the workload of people involved in supporting inclusive education create the potential for a conflict between their positions as a manager and a professional specialist. A number of studies in United Kingdom and elsewhere to understand the appropriate roles and functions related to supporting the inclusion policies in schools show the need for a coordinator's role as in the school system of Czech Republic. (Layton, 2005; Szwed 2007; Imants, Van Brabander & Ruijssenaars, 2011). The present study will investigate how the role of Educational Counsellor, called Výchovní Poradce in Czech, is played in supporting Children with Special Education Needs (SEN) in mainstream primary schools of Prague.

## **II. Objectives, Method and Background**

In the Czech Republic Pedagogical Counsellor (Výchovní Poradce) was a long established post for facilitating education of students with different psychological and social problems. The new legislation added to the general responsibility the function of coordinating the education of children with special education needs. The present research explores how the double role of the Educational Counsellor and of coordinator of activities in relation to children with special education needs is managed in practice. A total 26 participants including teachers, Educational Counsellors, special pedagogues (mainstream school), special pedagogues (special centres) and parents provided information collected through interviews, questionnaires and focus group discussions. A sequential mixed method design was applied where initial qualitative data collection and analysis was followed by a quantitative analysis of data.

The experiences of implementing inclusive education practices in the mainstream schools show that a position with coordinating responsibility needs to be established. For example, positions called Special Education Needs Coordinator (SENCO) and Special Services Coordinators (SSE) have been created respectively in UK and the Netherlands. As per the

state document Vyhláška 72/2005 of Czech Republic (MŠMT: 2005), a similar post known as “the pedagogical Counsellor (Výchovný Poradce)” has the role of coordinating the inclusion process in the mainstream school.

The position of the school counsellor in Czech Republic dates back to 1919 (Kopcanova:2000, Pacnerova. 2009). The aim was to offer career counselling or vocational counselling to students. (Kopcanova: 2000, Pacnerová: 2009). The scope of the counselling services extended to psychological diagnosis and counselling of the pupil in the 1950s (Kopcanova: 2000). Educational Counsellor, therefore, came to be associated with career and behavioural counselling. While counselling in general emphasized career and psychological counselling of the pupil, the Special Education Needs Coordinator (SENCO) focused on children with special education needs (Szwed: 2007). The two somewhat different objectives were integrated in the role of the Education Counsellor in the mainstream schools which adopted the inclusive education agenda.

### III. Findings and Discussion

The findings from school-based evidence have been compared with the review of the legislative documents and cross cultural studies to see how the Educational Counsellor plays the role in inclusion practices of the mainstream primary schools and the challenges faced in theory and practice.

The descriptive statistics below gives a glimpse of background picture of inclusion in the study sites (figures 1 and 2).

**Figure 1: Teachers’ Support for Inclusive Education**

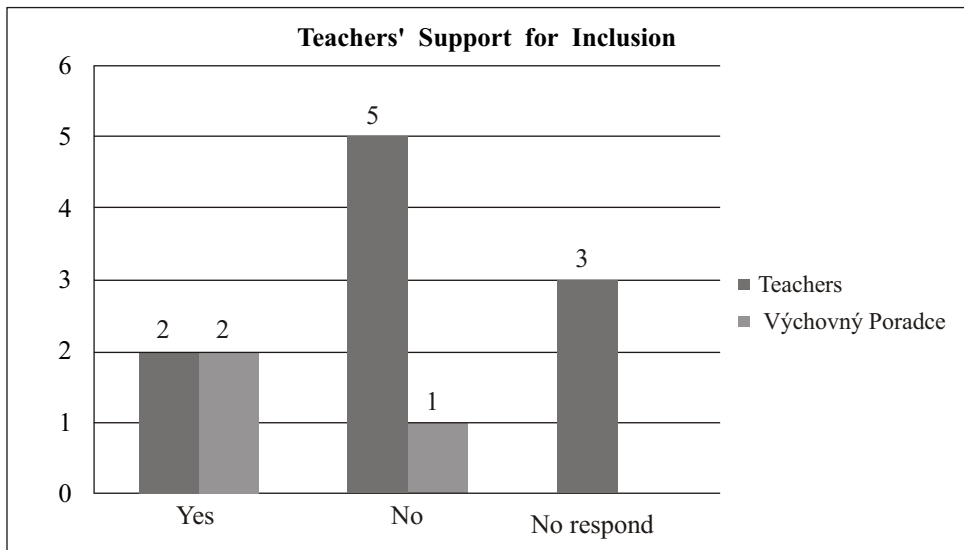


Figure 1 shows only two out of ten teachers interviewed supported the idea of integrating all the children with special needs in the mainstream schools. Five teachers out of seven thought all the children could not be integrated into the mainstream school. On the other hand, two Educational Counsellors agreed that all the children with special educational needs could be included in the schools.

In answer to the question why they think inclusion is not possible, the following reasons are stated by both teachers and counsellors.

**Figure 2: Barriers of Inclusive Education in Mainstream Schools**

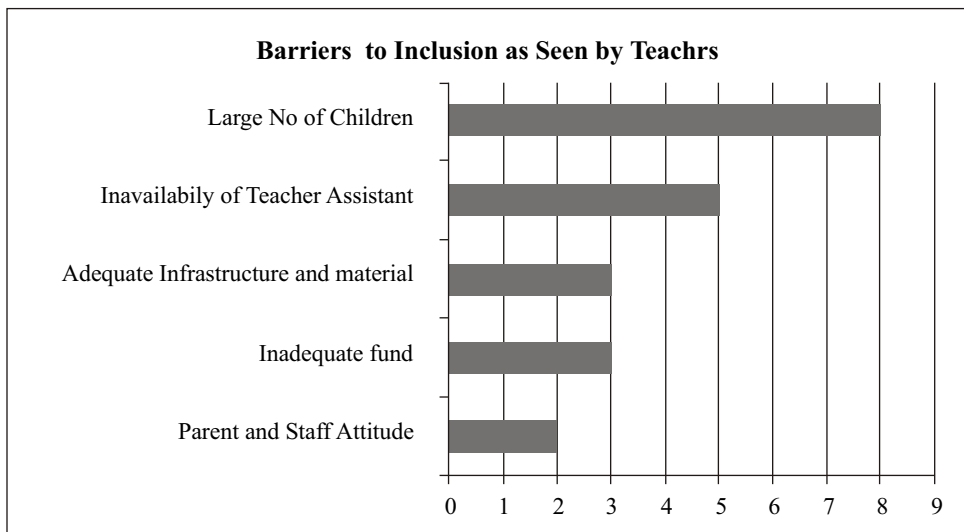


Figure 2 shows the barriers to integration as seen by teachers. Teachers mentioned these barriers as reasons for integration not being possible in mainstream schools. A large number of children in the classroom is identified as the biggest hindrance to inclusion. Teachers believe that children with special education needs needed small groups to facilitate their education and care. The second, third and fourth reasons were lack of teaching assistants in the class, deficient infrastructure, and insufficient learning materials. The commonly assumed hindrance to inclusive education, such as, attitudinal and belief systems, were mentioned by two teachers.

The data show that the majority of teachers have a negative view about inclusive education. This is not surprising, as the end user “the practical implementation of inclusion places considerable pressure on individual teachers” (Konza: 2008). Cross country studies, such as a 14 country study by Bowman, also show similar findings. (Bowman cited in Konza: 2008). As one teacher participant in the study commented:

Despite the attempts to enable SEN children join the general population, some children will still prefer a small study team and a strictly individual approach. Moreover, integration is only possible with an assistant teacher, which is expensive.

Perception about and attitude towards inclusion are obviously vital for implementation of inclusive education in mainstream schools.

**Figure 3 Teacher Experience by type of Teachers**

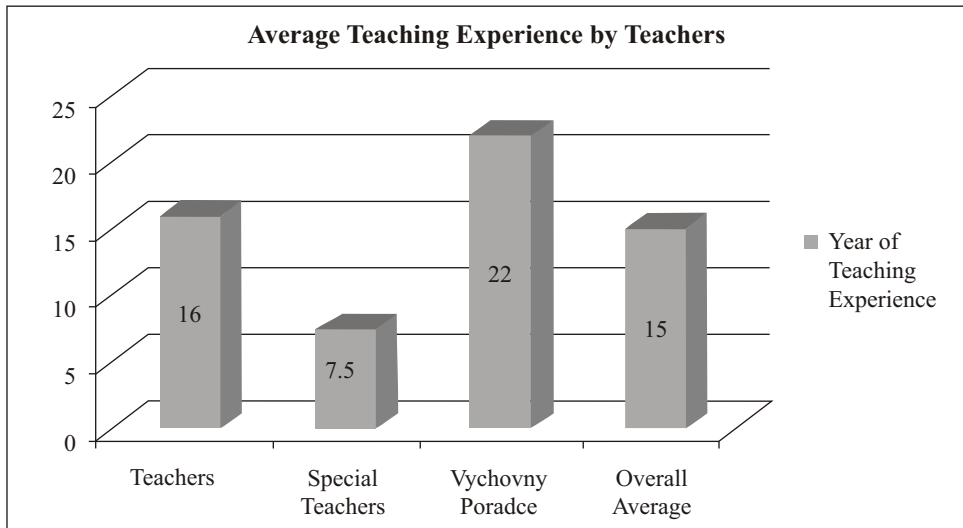


Figure 3 shows that teachers with long experience are appointed as Educational Counsellors, who have an average of 22 years of teaching experience. In contrast, the special pedagogue has only 7.5 years of experience on average, which is half of the average years of experience for all teachers. It indicates the seniority of the Educational Counsellor and newness of the post of special teacher in mainstream schools.

### **Key Findings**

#### ***1. Role of the Educational Counsellor***

The role played in respect of counselling by teachers can be summarised as follows:

- The role of the Educational Counsellor regarding children with special education needs and inclusive education practices vary from school to school.
- The Special Education pedagogue with guidance from the Educational Counsellor generally do initial diagnosis, discusses with parents about referring the child to specialists as needed, initiate preparation of individual educational plan (IEP) for the child, coordinate training for the teacher and students and keep record of the SEN children.

- Most of the teachers performing counselling duties act as behavioural counsellor rather than special educator specialist or coordinator

After the political change of the Velvet revolution (1989), change has also taken place in the tasks and in the organisation of educational counselling. Counselling care for handicapped children has been extended, especially in connection with the requirement of social and educational integration of these children. (Pacnerová: 2009). The new role of the Educational Counsellor has been codified by the Czech educational decree /Vyhlaška 72/2005 titled as the “Decree on provision of advisory services at schools and at school advisory facilities.” (MŠMT, 72/2005:2009)

The understanding of the roles of the Educational Counsellor, the special education pedagogue, and how they interact and support each other remain an issue with regard to serving children with special education needs effectively. On the whole the school special pedagogue takes the responsibility for SEN children, though the new state decree entrusts the major responsibility to the Educational Counsellor. Both teachers and Counsellors appear to have unclear and sometimes contrasting views about their responsibilities regarding children with special needs.

## ***2. Coordination of training regarding special education***

- Some of the Counsellors arrange training sessions for students and teachers; training on IEP, documentation, and looking after legal issues, concerning pupil with learning disabilities and general pupils.
- Coordination role of the Educational or Pedagogical Counsellor also vary from school to school and person to person. Most of the teachers reported that the Pedagogical Counsellor coordinate training programmes for the gifted students, school absenteeism, violence in school, and ethnic minority.

Training in terms of knowledge sharing is one of the tasks of the Educational Counsellor – a part of the counsellor’s role of leadership and initiation of inclusive practices in the mainstream schools. But the data show this role has not been played adequately. As noted by respondents, the lack of time and being overloaded with classes are the barriers to executing the responsibility of the Pedagogical Counsellor.

The state documents assigned a wide range of coordination role to the Educational Counsellor; from coordinating the development and implementation of inclusive approach in the school to arranging training of teachers, preparing and implementing activities related to integration of pupils; referral of students to specialists; and prevention of racism, xenophobia and other issues related to cultural and ethnic differences. Interventions initiated by the counsellor were found in the survey and mentioned in interviews. Participants mentioned programmes on bullying, drugs, crimes, and sexual education initiated by the Educational Counsellor. However, whether these add up to an adequate response to special education needs is debatable.

### ***3. Perception about and expectation of teachers regarding the tasks of Educational Counsellor***

- Educational Counsellors are mostly perceived as behavioural and career counsellor.
- Educational Counsellors are not perceived primarily as coordinator of services for SEN children. The expectations are also derived from the general perception about counsellor's role in coping with students' behavioural problems.

Very few cases of major disabilities were identified in the schools which were included in the study. Furthermore, newly recruited special education teachers took care of the few cases with special education needs.

### ***4. Challenges the Educational Counsellor faces***

- Teachers reported challenges faced by the Education Counsellor in respect of evaluating children, teaching methodologies, inadequate training of Educational Counsellor and their interaction with assistant teachers.
- The Educational Counsellors themselves did not mention problems in respect of integrating SEN children academically into the mainstream, especially in the senior grades, though the teachers had somewhat different views.
- Constraint of time, work burden, and many teaching hours were noted as management challenges

Participating teachers mentioned that the evaluation of children regarding their special needs and tests and evaluation procedures used were sometimes highly contentious. Part of this problem was not having enough knowledge of the children with special education needs. As the Government is promoting inclusive education, more children with special needs education are entering the mainstream schools. Therefore, the demand on special knowledge and expertise of Educational Counsellor is increasing. Few Educational Counsellors talked about their own challenges, but one was forthright about academic challenges in her task. She mentioned that when SEN children were promoted to second grade, she faced problems in providing adequate support for these children. This didactic challenge in integrating the children with special education needs into the mainstream classrooms has been observed in other European countries also. (Meijer,2001).

However, the few responses from the Educational Counsellor regarding this issue implies that schools were either not facing problems in integrating SEN children or not having enough activities for the children with disability in the concerned schools. The later possibility is consistent with the point discussed previously that the integration process was yet to start rigorously in Czech schools. Furthermore, the special pedagogue rather than the Educational Counsellor was more directly involved in this effort.

### ***5. Strategies to overcome the challenges for the Educational Counsellor***

- Frequent meetings, courses and workshops and personal initiatives can play a positive role in preparing the Educational Counsellor for his/her role.

- Most of Educational Counsellors choose collegial consultation with teachers and colleagues in performing their duty and solving problems.

One of the intentions of the present research study was to explore the challenges and barriers to performing the coordinating role by the Educational Counsellor. Although the small sample does not provide a definitive answer, it seems Educational Counsellor and other specialists work as a part of the team for serving the children's needs. This is significant for the inclusion process, since inclusive education is based on a unified general and special education system, success of which depends on the ability of various educators to work together (Power-deFur & Orelove, 1997). From the interviews and teachers' open comments it seems that collegial coordination process is practised widely in the Czech schools.

As Cerná (2000) mentioned, the education system in Czech Republic is passing through a long process of transition from a bureaucratic /hierarchical system to collaborative management. The introduction of the *Výchovný Poradce* can facilitate the movement towards a post-modern management approach emphasizing academic leadership, collaboration among all actors, training and individual pedagogical consultation. Post modern education management approach favours a flexible approach guided by a shared value system, in contrast to a technical and target-oriented paradigm (Aslanargun: 2007). Schools, under this approach, need a person with whom the students and teachers can share their problems without being distraught or feeling any pressure. Collegial trust to share personal and professional concerns in a threat-free environment is encouraged.

Both document analysis and the collected data show that Educational Counsellor is a senior teaching staff who is legislatively designated to take on the coordination responsibility in the school to address various needs of students. The leadership in coordination and a team approach create the potential for successful post-modern education management in Czech schools. Nonetheless, there are conflicts arising from habits, beliefs, resistance to change and fear of the unknown of various actors regarding respective roles and responsibilities. (Janney cited in Power-deFur & Orelove, 1997).

#### **IV. Relevance for Bangladesh**

At present Bangladesh is in dire need of counselling services as well as trained special educators in schools. Some concerns, which have been in much discussion recently, are "eve-teasing" (harassment of girl students by males), student suicide and attempted suicides reveal the need for psychological services in the school. Increase in school absenteeism, spreading of drug use among students, and distribution of pornography through information technology are also frequently cited problems. Corporal punishment or involving the law enforcing agency is not the best response to these problems. Careful psychological intervention is likely to be more helpful in confronting these challenges.

On the other hand, there is a recognition of the need to adopt inclusive education practices both by the government and non government organisations. Funding for modifying physical



facilities (e.g., building ramps) has been allocated and training has been arranged for teachers by different agencies. But a child with special education needs must have continuous and diversified support in the school, Many of them also need help for after school placement and rehabilitation. A teacher without adequate special education training and experience could hardly provide this kind of support.

The school system is not equipped at present to provide the support and services to children with special needs and to move in a significant way towards an inclusive education approach. Most schools probably cannot afford both an educational psychologist and special education teachers, when there is a shortage of regular teachers in the majority of mainstream schools. A beginning can be made by combining the role of the special educator and the school psychologist and appointing such people, with adequate qualification and training, in the school. It can be piloted in a small number of schools and can be expanded to all schools in phases.

## V. Conclusion

Some of the findings of this study are in line with the findings of past cross country studies and some have emerged as new insights. It appears that the role of the Educational Counsellor is not a one-person coordination concern. It is rather a mechanism for establishing a team approach and school-wide and system-wide responsibility for building an inclusive system. In Czech schools, with a long tradition of the school counsellor, the role of the Educational Counsellor is not directly related to the education of children with disability. It is rather a senior position with the responsibility of guiding overall inclusion and integration embracing student absenteeism, social-pathological phenomena, disability, and ethnic and cultural diversity – supported by special education teachers and other teachers in the school. This overall responsibility of the Educational Counsellor requires the adoption of a whole school approach, going beyond just the pedagogic issues. The potential of the broad role of the Education Counsellor can be realised only with adequate management support from the school and higher levels and appropriate training for teachers and other personnel.

The relevance of the Czech experience for Bangladesh lies in recognising the need for taking appropriate initial steps for starting a process for piloting and expanding in phases the inclusive education methods and mechanisms.

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