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## **Analysis of the discourse on education and rehabilitation of persons with multiple disabilities in the Czech Republic**

### KEYWORDS

multiple education, Czech Republic, special education, pedagogical research

### ABSTRACT

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At the core of the Czech education system and rehabilitation for people with multiple disabilities to the assumption that this is a group that requires a specialized approach to this issue. The main purpose of the text is to present the organization of education of people with multiple disability in the Czech Republic. Education and rehabilitation with the participation of people with multiple disabilities encourages to undertake research related to the dynamics of changes as well as their size. This work is an attempt to show how various factors have shaped the current form of education of people with multiple disability in the Czech Republic.

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### **Foreword**

This paper is an attempt to analyse the discourse on education and rehabilitation of persons with multiple disabilities in the Czech Republic. The problem of educa-

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tion and rehabilitation of persons with disabilities has been the subject of numerous deliberations of special needs educators in the Czech Republic (Bełza 2015; Kasprzak 2017, 2018, 2019a, 2019b; Sovák 1986; Suralová 2001; Ludíková 2003; Vašek 2003; Proházková 2005; Pipeková 2006; Vítková 2006). I decided to explore the understanding of this category – as the object of pedagogical research – in Czech institutions. First of all, this paper is not a review of the achievements of Czech special needs education in terms of multiple disabilities studies; rather it is an outline presenting the information I have gained so far. In my paper, I would like to discuss the problem of the population of persons with multiple disabilities, which, undoubtedly, is a very diversified group, mainly due to the co-existence of different types and degrees of disabilities.

Lucie Proházková defines multiple disabilities as a phenomenon that has multiple symptoms, multiple factors and multiple causes and is manifested by significant cognitive deficits in the area of communication (2005: 26–31). Meanwhile, Andrzej Twardowski emphasizes the fact that “multiple disabilities are not a simple sum of individual impairments, but instead, they are a specific, separate and complex whole” (2001: 131).

Problems caused by multiple disabilities exist on several dimensions. We should focus on defining the level of engagement, communication methods and cognitive functions. Etiological factors causing multiple disabilities are very diversified. Combined impairments may occur at every stage of ontogenetic development. Their source may be hereditary factors or innate factors.

## **The context of multiple disabilities in the Czech Republic**

The post-communist social changes that took place in the Czech Republic after 1989 may not be reduced to mere economic transformations or changes in the economy, technology and education. In the last two decades, there has been a rapid, almost global development of new technologies, built on the conditions of the “information age”, pertaining to the post-industrial phase of capitalism. The idea of free market economy gained wide approval and became the foundation for contemporary democratic states. The motto of the anti-communist “velvet revolution” of 1989 in Czechoslovakia – the “Return to Europe” meant returning to the European community and building a wealthy society. In the Czech Republic, the transition from communism to democracy is considered to have been successful. The political system is stable and the standard of life of the Czechs is constantly growing. Despite the successes, persons with disabilities – the group that was the most

disadvantaged by the political transformation after 1989 – are left out (Kasprzak, 2019b).

Problems caused by multiple disabilities exist on several dimensions. We should focus on defining the scope of engagement, communication methods and the area of cognitive functions. Etiological factors that cause multiple disabilities are very diversified. Combined impairments may occur at any stage of ontogenetic development. Their source may be hereditary factors or innate factors. Dagmara Opatřilová identifies the following multifactorial complex conditions causing multiple disabilities: contamination; poisoning; developmental disorders; metabolic disorders; disorders in the functioning of the central nervous system (CNS); chromosomal disorders; environmental factors; mechanical brain damage; central nervous system dysfunctions as a result of complications during pregnancy or delivery (Opatřilová, 2005: 12).

In the Czech Republic, a person with disability is defined on the basis of the following regulations:

- **zákon č. 108/2006 Sb. o sociálních službách** [Act no. 108/2006 Sb. on Social Services]: disability is understood as physical, intellectual, auditory, visual or mixed limitations that make a person with disability dependent on another person;
- **zákon č. 198/2009 Sb. o rovném zacházení a právních prostředcích ochrany před diskriminací (antydiskriminací zákon)** [Act no. 198/2009 Sb. on Equal Treatment and Protection Against Discrimination, as amended]: disability means physical, sensory, intellectual or other limitations that deprive disabled persons of their right to equal treatment within the areas provided for in the Act. Such limitation must be prolonged, lasting for at least one year;
- **zákon č. 155/1995 Sb. důchodovém pojištění** [Act no. 155/1995 Sb. on Old Age Pension Insurance], which defines disability as a prolonged condition of bad health that negatively affects life and health.

The Czech analysis of the problem emphasizes the inconsistent use of the term of disability. Generally speaking, there is no single definition of disability in that country. Yet, there has been an evident change in the paradigm, in which the definition of a person with disability does not provide for their weaknesses, instead accentuating their potential and the support and help they receive. To name the condition in which a person has a combination of any two or more types of disabilities, the Czech literature on the subject uses several analogous terms defining multiple disabilities: manifold disabilities (*vícenásobné postižení*), “combined disabilities” (*kombinované postižení*). The three terms

are treated by specialists as synonyms and are in line with the latest trends in special needs education. In the Czech special needs education, multiple disabilities (*kombinované postižení*) mean the occurrence of several disabilities in a given person. It should be noted that each disability may take different forms and degrees of intensity. According to Miloš Sovák (1986: 231), multiple disabilities mean the occurrence of several impairments in one person that concur and are a direct cause of abnormalities in psychosocial and psychosomatic development. Marie Vitková (2006: 302) understands multiple disabilities as the overall complex of the limitations of a person, in all areas of the person's life. A person has reduced emotional, cognitive and communication skills. He stresses the fact that it is impossible to identify any "main symptoms of multiple disabilities".

The Government Committee for the Disabled (*Vládní výbor pro zdravotně postižené občany*), in its National Programme for creating equal opportunities for persons with disabilities (*Národní plán vytváření rovných příležitostí pro osoby se zdravotním postižením na období 2010–2014*) published in 2010 for the years 2010–2014 describes disability as "a prolonged condition of bad health that has not significantly improved and has not been eliminated. This situation, in most cases, is independent of human will". In 2009, the Czech Republic adopted the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The country that adopts this document is obliged to ensure observance of all the rights and freedoms of the individual, mainly based on the social integration of those persons. Persons with multiple disabilities in the Czech Republic represent a minimum share of the population, but their number has been constantly growing for a long time. Due to the diversity of multiple disabilities, it is hard to determine their exact number. The concept of multiple disabilities covers a relatively wide range of all kinds of disabilities that, combined with one another, may cause different degrees of disabilities. The Ministry of Education and Sport of the Czech Republic (*Ministerstvo školství, mládeže a tělovýchovy České republiky*) has divided multiple disabilities into three basic groups:

- The first group: intellectual disability is the dominant factor in this group.
  - Intellectual disability + sensory impairments (sensory integration disorders);
  - intellectual disability + speech disorders;
  - Intellectual disability + autism;
  - Intellectual disability + mental disorders;
- The second group: the dominant factor is motor disability and sensory integration disorders, speech disorders that combine with one another;

- The third group: the dominant factor is autism and its basic features: – autism + intellectual disability;
  - Autism – sensory impairments (sensory integration disorders);
  - Autism + motor disability;
  - Autism + speech disorders;

Meanwhile, Lili Monatová (1995: 59) presents a somewhat different division of persons with multiple disabilities:

- The primary disability (chronic diseases, motor disability, intellectual disability);
- Combination of intellectual and motor disabilities with hearing and speech disorders and mental disorders;
- The most serious disabilities:
  - Motor disability with visual impairments;
  - Motor disability with hearing impairments;
  - Simultaneous vision and hearing damage with speech disorders;
  - Cerebral palsy with motor and intellectual disabilities and speech disorders.

Štefan Vašek (2003) divides persons with multiple disabilities into three groups of symptoms, which are associated with: (1) intellectual disability, (2) deafblindness – simultaneous visual and hearing damage, (3) behavioural disorders combined with other disabilities. In order to find the right approach and understand the difficulties caused by the occurrence of multiple disabilities, it is worth quoting the four models (concepts) described by De Jong (Broekaert, 1999: 410).

**Table 1.** Four models (concepts) of multiple disabilities

<b>The index model</b> model sčítání (skládání)	Multiple disabilities exist when a person has two or more impairments whose gravity is equal to the sum of individual difficulties associated with a given disability.
<b>The multiplication model</b> model násobení	In this model, two or more impairments also form multiple disabilities, however, their gravity increases much faster than in the previous model.
<b>The steps model</b> model schodu	In this model, the central element is the specificity of the functioning of a person with multiple disabilities. When planning intervention, first, the person's problems need to be identified and on this basis, subsequent stages should be defined "step by step" in order to eliminate or mitigate the diagnosed disabilities.
<b>The circle model</b> model kruhu	In this model, two or more impairments affect the functioning of the body of a person with multiple disabilities, also between one another.

Source: Own elaboration based on: Broekaert, 1999; Zikl, 2005

These models are the condition to find the right approach to the most diversified group of persons with disabilities. It should be noted that multiple disabilities are not a simple sum of different disabilities. Libuše Ludíková (2005: 42) notes that the problem of combined disabilities is one of the most complicated domains in special needs education, and it has not been described in detail. The Bulletin of the Ministry of Education no. 8/1997 says that:

we speak of a child with multiple disabilities only if the child has two or more independent forms of disabilities, and the consequence of each of the respective disabilities is the placement of the child in special needs education. (Věstník MŠMT ČR č. 8/1997)

## Education of persons with multiple disabilities in the Czech Republic

The provision of education to persons with multiple disabilities in the Czech Republic depends on the degree of disability. Apart from the family and state institutions, in the last two decades, numerous non-government, social, charity and religious organisations and civic associations have developed that help provide access to education to persons with multiple disabilities. Considering the fact that special needs education deals with such persons increasingly often, relevant educational possibilities need to be found in order to help them achieve the highest level of independence possible.

Education of adults with multiple disabilities is mainly provided by evening schools. Jarmila Pipeková (2006: 283) notes that “evening schools are very important form of continued development of adults with multiple disabilities, stimulating their social contacts and enabling them to spend their free time in the right way”. Courses in evening schools are mainly a chance to get some training. Vocational education of persons with multiple disabilities in the Czech Republic is provided by public and non-public institutions. Children with multiple disabilities may receive pre-school and early childhood education at home or in special needs institutions (e.g. social care centres).

The education of persons with multiple disabilities is guaranteed on the basis of such documents as:

- **Listina základních práv a svobod v čl. 33. Ústavy České republiky** [The Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms (the right to education is provided for in Article 33 of the Constitution of the Czech Republic)]; it

is a part of the constitutional order of the Czech Republic and is founded mainly on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 adopted by the Government of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. According to Article 33, every citizen has the right to free education, the right to free university education and the right to establish non-public schools;

- **Národní program rozvoje vzdělávání v ČR – “Bílá hniha”** [The National Programme for the Development of Education in the Czech Republic, the “White Book”]: it is the effect of analyses and evaluations of the Czech educational system after 1989. It notes that the priority should be the socio-economic development of the Czech Republic, which has a “decisive impact on the human capital”. It was developed pursuant to the Resolution of the Czech Government no. 277 of 7 April 1999. The National Programme became the starting point for the development of the principles of the education system in the Czech Republic. As regards persons with multiple disabilities, it is supposed to create and support an environment that stimulates integration. It is necessary to ensure the education of children with very severe degrees of disabilities, who were previously excluded from the education system;
- **Zákon ze dne 19. března 2015, kterým se mění zákon č. 561/2004 Sb. o předškolním, základním, středním, vyšším odborném** [The Act of 19 August 2015 amending the Act no. 561/2004 Sb. on Teaching in Kindergartens, Primary Schools, Vocational Schools and Other Schools] describes support for children, youth and students with special educational needs, such as individualised instruction or the use of assisting devices, special manuals or teaching aids;
- **Výhláška ze dne 2 června 2016 kterou se mění výhláška č. 72/2005 Sb. o poskytování poradenských služeb ve školách a školských poradenských zařízeních** [The Decree of 2 June 2016 amending the Directive no. 72/2005 Sb. on the Provision of School Counselling in Schools], regarding persons with disabilities, it defines the target groups of school counselling, e.g. pupils with mental disorders, motor disability, visual or hearing impairment, speech impairment, multiple disabilities;
- **Výhláška č. 27/2016 Sb. o vzdělávání žáků se speciálními vzdělávacími potřebami a ráků nadaných** [The Decree no. 27/2016 Sb. on the Education of Pupils with Special Educational Needs and Gifted Pupils] governs the principles of teaching children, pupils and students with special educational needs. It defines the means of support and individual teaching plans for

pupils, ensures the help of a teacher assistant and enables communication in the Czech Sign Language (ensures a translator and transcription for deaf pupils). The Decree introduces procedures associated with providing financial support for schools;

Once children with disabilities were included in compulsory education in the Czech Republic, the term: “children/pupils with special educational needs” started to be used. The category of pupils with multiple disabilities is divided into the following three groups in the educational discourse (Zákon č. 561/2004 Sb., §16.):

- The first group, whose common feature is intellectual disability and additional disabilities (sensory impairments, speech impairments);
- The second group consists of a combination of sensory damages and impairments. A special group are deaf-blind children;
- The third group are pupils on the autism spectrum (with autistic traits).

The problem of the education of persons with multiple disabilities has recently found its place in the contemporary concepts of special needs education. In the Czech Republic, a scholarly approach to persons with multiple disabilities developed in the 1980s. Back then, studies focused on evaluating which (of the many) disabilities has the decisive impact on the social functioning disorders of such persons. On this basis, specific procedures for teaching persons with multiple disabilities were developed. The theoretical and empirical research conducted back then proved that persons with two or more disabilities could not be considered as a sum of “normal” disabilities for whom a specific combination of educational methods and approaches is used. As a result of that research, a completely new and unique type of disability was defined, which should be treated comprehensively and with particular attention. Štefan Vašek, (2003: 9) defines special needs education of persons with multiple disabilities as a discipline that is “a relatively comprehensive system of scholarly knowledge about education (upbringing, teaching and learning) of persons with multiple disabilities who, for many reasons, have special educational needs. This domain has its theoretical as well as practical background”.

The education of pupils with multiple disabilities is a hot topic in discussions. Compared to previous years, when the opinions on the education of persons with multiple disabilities were negative, we now notice the development of integration processes in their education. The current trend in the Czech Republic focuses mainly on self-care, alternative communication and performance of social roles. An individual approach is accentuated, which leads to individualised instruction involving a team of specialists in various areas (special needs educators, psychologists, physicians, social workers).



**Table 2.** The most important principles in the education of persons with multiple disabilities

<b>The principle of clarity</b> Zásada názornosti	This concerns mainly special needs schools. It is important to realise that children with multiple disabilities find it very difficult to generalise concepts. Pupils acquire knowledge through teaching aids and with their help, they perceive the world around them by seeing, hearing and touching.
<b>The principle of proportionality</b> Zásadou přiměřenosti	It involves selecting the right model, content and teaching structures, adequate to the age, skills and level of disability of the respective pupils.
<b>The principle of cohesion</b> Zásada soustavnosti	It is particularly important for teachers who should choose this teaching method in order to solidify the pupils' existing knowledge and social skills.
<b>The principle of durability</b> Zásada trvalosti	It concerns the skills and habits that persons with multiple disabilities need to practice regularly. The teacher should enable pupils to use the skills they have learned in social life.
<b>The principle of pupil's awareness and active participation</b> Zásada uvědomělosti a aktivity žáků	The awareness of acquiring new knowledge is important for pupils' future experiences. This process should start as early as possible. Thus, pupils should be acquainted with what will be happening in the classroom, what tasks they will be expected to do and how they can use their knowledge and broaden their interests.
<b>The principle of individual approach</b> Zásada individuálního přístupu	It enables reducing the number of pupils in a classroom and the presence of two teachers during classes.

Source: Own elaboration based on: Valenta, Müller, 2013

## Conclusion

Every tenth citizen<sup>1</sup> of the Czech Republic is disabled. Many of them live in small towns or villages, where they have no access to education. The problem of multiple disabilities is still little known among the Czech society. This is mainly due to limited awareness; many people think multiple disabilities to be something abstract. The direction and dynamics of changes in the field of the education of persons with multiple disabilities provide many useful guidelines concerning the need for systemic changes, and, most importantly, the integration of those persons with the rest of the society. In the light of the main idea of this paper, of the observed changes in the Czech society, the positive ones are those that build an environment conducive to creating open education for those persons. The negative ones are those factors that hinder the process – by this I mean mainly the prejudices held against “the other” in the Czech society. The direction of changes taking place in

<sup>1</sup> The total number of persons with disabilities in the Czech Republic is 1,077,673. Results pursuant to the research: Vybrané údaje o sociálním zabezpečení (2015)

the Czech Republic in terms of the approach to persons with multiple disabilities is in line with the spirit of international instruments concerning the rights of persons with disabilities (e.g. the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities of the Declaration of Human Rights).

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