

KLÁRA ELIÁŠKOVÁ

ORCID 0000-0003-0799-5939

OLGA KUČEROVÁ

ORCID 0000-0001-6269-7876

Charles University

TEACHERS AND TEACHING ASSISTANTS - TEAMWORK AS PREVENTION OF SCHOOL FAILURE OF PUPILS DURING PRIMARY EDUCATION

ABSTRACT. Eliášková Klára, Kučerová Olga, *Teachers and Teaching Assistants – Teamwork as Prevention of School Failure of Pupils During Primary Education* [Nauczyciele i asystenci nauczycieli – praca zespołowa jako zapobieganie niepowodzeniom szkolnym uczniów w szkole podstawowej]. *Studia Edukacyjne* no. 70, 2023, Poznań 2023, pp. 225-249. Adam Mickiewicz University Press. ISSN 1233-6688. Submitted: 11.10.2023. Accepted: 07.12.2023. DOI: 10.14746/se.2023.70.14

This paper investigates the topic of teacher-teaching assistant collaboration in supporting pupils who are at risk of school failure. This topic was addressed, as one of the subtopics, by a longitudinal research study investigating the causes of school failure/success among primary school pupils in the Czech Republic. The aim of the present study is to describe the activities that teaching assistants pursue in relation to “at-risk” pupils or in relation to other pupils in the classroom. The descriptive part of the paper also reviews various forms of teacher-teaching assistant collaboration during the teaching process. This empirical study consists of two parts. In the theoretical introduction, we describe the system of support and advisory services used to implement inclusive education in Czech schools. We also describe the legislative definition of the teaching assistant position and present his/her job description. The empirical part of the paper presents the conclusions of our research survey, which captures how teaching assistance is currently practiced in Czech primary education.

Key words: inclusion, teaching assistant, support measures, teacher-teaching assistant collaboration, pupils at risk of school failure, prevention of school failure

Implementing inclusive education and a support system in Czech schools

By signing the Salamanca Statement in 1994 ((Right to Education (n. d.)) the Czech Republic made a commitment to promote and implement the principles of inclusive education in its education system. In the context of

the Czech Republic, the principle of inclusion is also referred to as inclusive education. The aim of inclusive education is to establish conditions that ensure that schools are as open as possible to accepting all students and to create conditions allowing students with different special educational needs to be educated in the mainstream education system. At the same time, it is necessary to ensure that the educational needs of other pupils (intact pupils, i.e. pupils with no special educational needs) are met. Implementation of this concept requires sufficient education, training and support for the teaching staff who are the main implementers of inclusive education (Both, Ainscow, 2002).

This makes it clear that inclusive education cannot be implemented without providing quality preparation to educators who should possess pedagogical skills that will enable them to create an environment ensuring the educational development of all pupils in the classroom. When educating pupils with special educational needs, Czech teachers can rely on the support of the school counselling system, which currently operates as a five-level model of care. The system is legislatively anchored in Decree 27/2016 Coll.¹ and is based on the **preventive intervention model**.

The **preventive intervention model** is based on the ethical principle of not letting students fail in school. As soon as signs of incipient school failure appear, the teacher is fully empowered to implement measures to prevent problems from escalating, i.e. preventive measures. At the same time, the freedom and autonomy of the teacher in adapting the methods and forms of instruction and evaluation of their outcomes are strengthened. If the adopted measures are not successful, the teacher refers the pupil for diagnosis to a school counselling centre. With the expert help of a school counselling centre, teachers and other teaching staff involved in a pupil's education can prevent the potential development of educational problems.

The key elements of this approach are **support measures**. These entail a broad system of support that teachers can use in the education of pupils with special educational needs. Support measures are implemented whenever there is a need to level the playing field for a pupil's education (www.msmt.cz). The system of support measures is stipulated by Decree 27/2016 Coll. (see above) and consists of a hierarchical system of five levels that are interconnected. In the event that a lower-level support measure fails, a support measure at a higher level is adopted. The higher the level of support, the greater the need to adjust the conditions of the educational process (or the higher the degree of disadvantage), which often also entails higher costs for teaching staff and teaching aids. It is compulsory for the

¹ Decree No. 27/2016 Coll. of 21 January, 2016 – Decree on the education of pupils with special educational needs and gifted pupils.

school to evaluate the effectiveness of support measures in place every three months. If the measures are not effective, the pupil is referred for an examination to one of the educational and psychological counselling centres available in larger cities.

The **first level of support** is proposed by the school and implemented by the teacher immediately once the pupil starts showing initial signs of school failure. Most frequently, this measure consists in adjusting the methods and forms of teaching and in adjusting the assessment of teaching outcomes. The school does not receive any extra funding to implement these measures as they are part of the teacher's standard work. If the teacher's individualised approach to the pupil's education is not sufficient, the child needs to undergo a comprehensive examination at a school counselling centre. On the basis of this examination, **support measures of levels 2 to 5** are recommended. The exact form of the support measures is proposed by the school counselling centre in cooperation with the school, as the school is responsible for their implementation. In "mainstream" schools, the most frequent support measures are level 1 and 2 measures, as this group of measures most often addresses pupils with specific learning disabilities (dyslexia, dysgraphia, dysorthography, etc.). **Level 3** support measures entail a principal systemic change in that the pupil can be educated with the help of an additional member of the teaching staff, a **teaching assistant**, on whom our research focuses in this paper.

Historical context of teaching assistance in the Czech Republic

Primarily, the provision of teaching assistance is related to the educational needs of pupils with disabilities and it aims to create the most accommodating environment for these pupils to ensure equal access to education. However, historically this was not always the case. The concept of teaching assistance has been taking shape in Czech education since the late 1990s.² The conceptual framework of this profession has undergone a very complex journey, both in terms of methodology, staffing and qualifications.³ Initially, the teaching assistant profession developed separately for assistants helping **pupils with disabilities**, who were placed in special schools, and for assistants helping so-

² The teaching assistant profession was officially established in 1997 as part of the *Status of Experimental Verification of Preparatory Classes*.

³ E.g., Němec et al. (2014, p. 10) mention that at the end of the 1990s, conscripts on civilian service served as teaching assistants, i.e. this job was an option for alternative non-military service.

cially disadvantaged pupils (originally, teaching assistants for socially disadvantaged pupils were intended exclusively for students of **Roma ethnicity**).⁴

After 2004, the teaching assistant profession shifted significantly towards supporting inclusive education of pupils with disabilities⁵ (Němec et al., 2014, p. 10) when, in the new legislative definition of teaching assistance, the new Education Act emphasised **inclusive education** regardless of the target group of pupils with special educational needs (hereinafter referred to as “SEN”). This new concept, stripped of the earlier linking to ethnicity, remains the basis of teaching assistance today, although it has undergone numerous updates and functional innovations aimed at improving the overall quality of the education system for pupils with SEN.

The **current legislation** regulates both the position of teaching assistants in special schools and their role in the education of pupils with SEN integrated into mainstream schools, i.e. in an environment of inclusive education. The provision of teaching assistance is nowadays conceived as a **support measure**, the adoption of which is within the powers of school counselling centres (see above). The qualification requirements for this profession are laid down by law⁶ along with the general framework defining the expected tasks of a teaching assistant with respect to the assistant’s qualifications and the type of educational institution where the assistant operates⁷. The Czech education system, from the point of view of school legislation, therefore has systemically anchored requirements on the teaching assistant profession (including, in particular, required professional qualifications, possibilities of further qualification training and education, basic job description framework, inclusion of the profession in the catalogue of jobs, determination of salary, etc.) – which should be a fundamental pillar of inclusive education.

Job description of the teaching assistant profession and its legislative framework

The work of teaching assistants is therefore regarded as one of the support measures in the Czech education system. The teaching assistant profession is

⁴ The linking of the teaching assistant profession to pupil ethnicity was abolished by the *Methodological guidance of the Ministry of Education and Science on the establishment of preparatory classes for socially disadvantaged children and on the establishment of the teaching assistant position* (Němec et al., 2014, p. 10).

⁵ I.e. in mainstream schools.

⁶ According to S. 20(1) of Act No. 563/2004 Coll. of 24 September, 2004 on pedagogical staff and on amendments to certain acts.

⁷ Cf. S. 20(1) of Act No. 563/2004 Coll. on pedagogical staff and on amendments to certain acts of 24 September, 2004 and S. 5 of Decree No. 27/2016 Coll. of 21 January, 2016. – Decree on the education of pupils with special educational needs and gifted pupils.

described in detail in key legislation, i.e. in the Education Act (561/2004 Coll.) and in S. 20(1) of the Pedagogical Staff Act (563/2004 Coll.). In general, the teaching assistant's role can be described as **cooperation with another member of teaching staff** (i.e. most often a teacher) in the education of pupils with special educational needs, either by specifically assisting a particular pupil or by assisting several pupils in need of educational assistance jointly (cf. S. 5(1) and (2) of Decree No. 27/2016 Coll.) in order to facilitate the teacher's work in the classroom so that the teacher himself/herself has more time and space to individually support pupils with special educational needs (Hájková et al., 2018, p. 6). The current legislation (Decree No. 27/2016 Coll.) stipulates that a teaching assistant may provide support to multiple pupils at once, but to no more than 4 pupils in one regular classroom. Also, no more than 5 pupils who have been granted second – to fifth-level support measures may be educated in one classroom (Růžička et al., 2019, p. 15). In cases where there are more than 5 pupils in a classroom with a need for second – to fifth-level support measures and none of these pupils uses a teaching assistant, a **shared assistant** can be used (Růžička et al., 2019, p. 15).

The basic scope of a teaching assistant's tasks, which clearly reflects the principle of cooperation, is defined as follows in S. 5 of Decree No. 27/2016 Coll. on the education of pupils with special needs and gifted pupils:

(1) A teaching assistant provides support to another teaching staff member in the education of a pupil or pupils with special educational needs within the scope of the support measure. A teaching assistant assists another teaching staff member in the organisation and implementation of education, supports the independence and active involvement of the pupil in all educational activities carried out in the school, including the provision of school services.

(2) A teaching assistant works with pupils in a class, department or study group as required, as instructed by and in collaboration with another member of the teaching staff.

(3) A teaching assistant, for whose work the prerequisites are laid down in S. 20(1) of the Pedagogical Staff Act (note by the author – with the qualification requirement of having completed upper secondary education with maturita examination), provides in particular:

- a) direct pedagogical work in education and training according to the teacher's or educator's clearly defined procedures and instructions on providing individual support to pupils and tasks related to this direct pedagogical work;
- b) support to the pupil in achieving educational goals during instruction and preparation for instruction, while guiding the pupil towards independence to the highest possible degree;

- c) educational work focused on the formation of basic work, hygiene and other habits and other tasks related to the development of social competences.
- (4) A teaching assistant, for whose work the prerequisites are laid down in S. 20(2) of the Pedagogical Staff Act (note by the author – without the qualification requirement of having completed upper secondary education with matura examination), provides in particular:
- a) auxiliary educational work aimed at supporting the teacher, especially when working with a group of pupils with special educational needs;
 - b) organisational support in the education of a group of pupils with special educational needs;
 - c) assistance to pupils with special educational needs in adapting to the school environment;
 - d) assistance in communicating with pupils, their legal guardians and the pupils' community;
 - e) the necessary assistance to pupils in self-care and movement during classes and at events organised by the school outside the place where the school provides education or school services in accordance with the school register;
 - f) auxiliary educational work related to the development of social competences of pupils with special educational needs.⁸

The specific role of a teaching assistant **is always determined by the school headteacher, taking into account the specific educational needs of the pupil** as defined in the recommendation of the school counselling centre or based on the pupil's current needs or current state of health. A teaching assistant continuously carries out direct pedagogical work during education and training according to the teacher's or educator's clearly defined procedures and instructions on providing individual support to pupils and tasks related to this direct pedagogical work. In cooperation with the teacher, the teaching assistant supports the pupil in achieving educational goals during instruction and preparing for instruction, while guiding the pupil towards independence to the highest possible degree. In addition, a teaching assistant may perform auxiliary educational work aimed at supporting the teacher, especially when working with a group of pupils with SEN, may perform auxiliary organisational activities in the education of a group of pupils with SEN, assist in the adaptation of these pupils to the school environment and in communication with the pupils, their legal guardians and the pupils' community. The job duties of a teaching assistant may also include assistive educational work related

⁸ According to S. 5 of Decree No. 27/2016 Coll. of 21 January, 2016 – Decree on the education of pupils with special educational needs and gifted pupils.

to training pupils with SEN in social competences and activities related to the necessary assistance to pupils during self-care and movement during classes and off-site events organised by the school. In this respect, some activities overlap with the role of a **personal assistant**.⁹

Thus, the Czech education system considers it as a standard teaching profession, subject to the same legislative norms, regardless of the specific educational needs of the pupils.

Empirical part

Research problem

Despite the above-mentioned fact that the teaching assistant profession is more or less clearly defined by legislation in terms of qualifications and job description, in school practice, we still see uncertainty regarding individual competencies as well as other aspects of teaching assistants' educational tasks. From a number of previous national and international research studies (further details in Němec et al., 2014, 2014b; Hájková et al, 2018; Kendíková, 2020, etc.) we know that teachers often lack clearly defined parameters of cooperation with assistants and, on the other hand, teaching assistants lack conceptual methodological guidance and decision-making authority, they lack adequate financial remuneration, and their qualification training often proves to be insufficient (Němec et al. 2014b; Hájková et al. 2018; Kendíková, 2020, etc.). They feel this especially when they change schools and their new experience shows them that the approaches taken by different schools, or rather teachers and school management, can be diametrically different. During a job interview, an applicant for a teaching assistant position for a pupil with autism spectrum disorder asked the interviewer:

“I would like to ask if I would actually be working with the pupil. At my previous school, I was often pulled away from the pupil and the class and assigned other tasks for which there was no one else available or which the teachers didn't want to do.

⁹ Personal assistance is intended for one person to help with hygiene, self-care, contact with the social environment, handling of legal matters, etc., which the client is unable to do due to his/her disability. From the perspective of the Czech education system, a personal assistant is not a pedagogical worker, and therefore cannot be a school employee. It is a service provided on the basis of the Social Services Act (S. 39 of Act No. 108/2006 Coll.), and therefore the parents pay for the service themselves, usually with a contribution from a non-profit organisation, whereas the salary of a teaching assistant is covered by the state. This causes considerable problems in the organisation of pupils' education and training. In practice, the issue is handled in a non-systematic way, typically relying on the altruistic approach of the teaching assistant who performs this activity as part of their job.

So, in my working hours, I often took letters to the post office, watered flowers in the building, or supervised in the cafeteria instead of assisting the pupil. I wasn't happy with this and neither were the parents, who thought I would be of help to the pupil. The headteacher told me that if the teacher didn't need me in the classroom during some lessons, I was given other tasks, but I was supposed to be with the pupil for all of the lessons."

This type of inadequate approach to the worker, in conjunction with the longstanding problem of extremely low salaries for the difficult and erudite work of a teaching assistant (Němec & Michalík, 2015), is not conducive to increasing the prestige of and interest in the profession, but on the contrary, it can further erode the existing low interest in jobs for which it is difficult to find suitable teaching staff. The shortage of teaching assistants in schools often forces the school management to retain employees in these positions whose professional or personal qualifications are less than convincing because they have no other options. It is important to constantly point this out as a categorical imperative, for the work of an assistant helping pupils with SEN, who are often at-risk of school failure, should/must be an essential pillar of inclusive education.

It is well known in the professional and practical discourse that professionalisation of teaching assistance is crucial both to strengthen the professional identity of assistants and for the educational process (Hájková, V. et al., 2018, p. 17-25), and that the quality of inclusive education cannot be continually improved without support of the professional growth of assistants, who often obtain their work qualifications through a brief training course. If a teaching assistant lacks sufficient education, s/he cannot carry out quality work and his or her presence in the classroom may even be counterproductive (Růžička et al., 2019, p. 12). It is important to bear in mind that an assistant always works under the guidance of the teacher, but with the growing number of children engaged in inclusive education, teachers increasingly delegate qualified instruction of subjects to teaching assistants, making them the primary educators (Němec et al., 2014, p. 47; Růžička et al., 2019) and through this deprofessionalisation of their own qualified instruction, for which they are directly responsible, teachers reduce equal access to qualified teaching for pupils with SEN (further details in Eliášková, K., 2021; Eliášková & Štěpáník, 2022).

Although the core of a teaching assistant's work is based on direct collaboration with the teacher, the functional ambiguity of teacher-teaching assistant collaboration remains a sore spot on the positive co-existence of the pupils, teacher and assistants in a specific classroom environment. Assistance work

rests on well-functioning collaboration with the teacher, a solid understanding of the class and a good rapport with the pupil to whom the given assistant is assigned. In comparison to teachers, teaching assistants must be in the classroom almost continually, even during breaks, when teachers leave the classroom to rest, prepare for lessons or to carry out other work tasks (e.g. supervising pupils in the hall, etc.), and thus teaching assistants know the class well. These are fundamental sub-areas of pedagogical knowledge on which to base effective collaboration – using knowledge about students from informal activities during e.g. cooperative learning, letting the assistant take part in preparing lessons, involving him/her in classroom issues, ideally taking an interest in his/her reflection on teaching, which certainly requires the teacher to be as open as possible. On the other hand, the assistant must accept the fact that s/he cannot teach and must guide the pupil to work as independently as possible and so that the pupil has enough space to achieve the educational objectives (detailed above).

We share some of the authentic responses from the research interviews to illustrate:

The thing that bothers me most is that I don't know which tasks I should delegate to the assistant in the classroom. The headteacher told me that the assistant is there to help me, but he didn't give me any guidance on what I can or cannot ask of the assistant. The assistant was surprised that I delegated a task to her that was outside of her job duties. Sometimes she even tells me that she won't do a task.

SYPO methodology seminar, Olomouc, April 2023

The assistant is assigned to a specific boy, but we agreed that she would also carry out other necessary tasks alongside that, such as checking in with other children, because I don't think it is a good idea for her to work only with the one child. He would get the feeling that he's different and other kids would ask why the assistant is only working with him... For example, while this boy is working on a task, the assistant is also available to others. When he is not working, then the assistant goes over to him and helps him or tells him to begin working.

Slivenec primary school, research survey

It bothers me to have the assistant there – I would rather do it myself. I only use her to accompany Tommy out of the classroom when he has a seizure. She's a colleague, so it's not easy ... and then during lunch she says that I'm telling her what to do and that I'm acting like I'm the headteacher. I don't need that.

Convening of teachers of integrated pupils, Grammar school
for the visually impaired, October 2022

We work well together, we hit it off, we're a pretty good team. She already knows which pupils she is supposed to help. She was originally supposed to help one little girl with dysphasia. She's a little girl who doesn't speak well. But she's really smart, playful and always positive, so the assistant helps me with other children too (...) I'm happy to have her there.

Dubeč primary school, research survey

From the teachers' responses it is clear that the delivery of teaching assistance depends primarily on the **degree and level of collaboration with the teacher**. The teacher's ability to manage the class and the learning process, ability to involve the teaching assistant well, accept the assistant professionally and personally and make the assistant part of the team of the whole class, or the school, are fundamental prerequisites for the successful education of pupils with SEN. In practice, teachers' reactions to the presence of a teaching assistant are not always positive (further details in Webster et al., 2010; Růžička et al., 2019; Kendíková et al., 2020 and others); often the assistant is perceived as an inadequate supervisor, an invader, teachers accuse assistants of overstepping their authority, etc. It should be pointed out that this is an issue that extends beyond the Czech educational context. Hájková et al. (2014, p. 19) cite the results of foreign research that indicate e.g. that assistants often give unwarranted hints to pupils, answer in place of pupils, may give pupils confusing explanations of the material or focus the pupils on formally completing a task rather than helping them understand the material, etc. Based on available expert studies and many discussions with teachers at methodology seminars in which we have participated, it is evident that it is a persistent problem. As a result, in our research survey we took a pronounced interest in this variable with the goal of continuously adding to existing research by identifying the current situation in our schools in the lower grades of primary education. We relied on a comparison with a 2019 research survey (Růžička et al.), which characterised in more detail the specifics of the teacher-teaching assistance relationship in the first level of primary school.

Aware of the findings of the major research surveys cited above, our project on school failure in primary education sought to determine the extent to which the situation in our schools has evolved. We observed how teachers involve the assistant present in the classroom in the teaching process in subjects that are necessarily perceived by children and parents as challenging and central, i.e. native language and mathematics. With regard to the process of preventing school failure among pupils with SEN, we considered it of foremost importance to identify the actual **delivery of teaching assistance in the first level of primary school**. We were interested in learning to what extent school

practice corresponds to the pedagogical profession described in detail in the legislation and in what ways teaching assistants take part/can take part in the prevention of school failure of pupils. We concentrated our research focus on teaching assistance in the inclusive education environment¹⁰, as our work is based on the conviction that teaching assistants (along with other measures) in the first level of primary education are a key element of the inclusive education system of support.

Brief project description

This research study is part of an extensive research project realised under the auspices of the Faculty of Education of Charles University in collaboration with the Faculty of Education of the University of South Bohemia with the financial support of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports in the Operational Programme Research, Development and Education (OP RDE) from summer 2020 to summer 2023 (<http://skolniuspech.pedf.cuni.cz>). The main area of investigation was school success. The research aim was to identify the efficacy of various pedagogical approaches to prevent school failure in mathematics and native language at the beginning of the first level of primary education. In each class, we selected data from the second and third grades of primary school. The research sample consisted of 657 pupils and included 321 boys (49%) and 336 girls (51%) from 29 primary schools in Prague, the Central Bohemian region and South Bohemian region. The class size varied from 18 to 29 pupils. Classes were selected with consideration of the teachers' personalities. Teachers had to fulfil basic criteria – practice exceeding 10 years, full qualifications in the field, and excellent teaching skills (based on the headteacher's assessment). For this sub-research study it is significant that there was a teaching assistant in a total of 18 classes.

The research is longitudinal; we observed the respondents during the second and third grades. The data were obtained using several methods: observation of classes, interviews with teachers, a questionnaire, standardised psychological testing and didactic tests in Czech language and mathematics. Our principal aim was to describe successful teaching strategies used by teachers to prevent development of school failure among pupils.

We used several means to obtain the data for the analyses in this part of the research. The first was an in-depth interview with teachers about how they cooperate with their teaching assistant and how tasks are divided. We further worked with the results of structured observation, which comprised a minimum of 20 hours of observation of classroom instruction. This observation was primarily focused on two main subjects: Czech language and math-

¹⁰ I.e. the research was not conducted in special schools.

ematics. We used a quantitative approach (item analysis) to data analysis, which was supplemented by qualitative data processing (thematic analysis).

Research tools

The teaching assistant job duties are defined very broadly. However, the main professional requirement on delivery of TA¹¹ is clear: a teaching assistant helps with the *organisation and implementation of education, supports the independence and active involvement of the pupil in all educational activities carried out in the school, including the provision of school services* (see above). Therefore, in our research, we identified the basic areas in which we believe that the involvement of teaching assistants should be fully established, and on the basis of the questionnaire survey and semi-structured interviews, we determined to what extent and in what ways they are implemented in classrooms with a teaching assistant. Another key part of the data collection was direct observation in classes of Czech language and mathematics (further details below).

Table 1

Overview of monitored teaching assistance areas

Group	Monitored area	Questions
A	Class climate	The TA expresses interest in the well-being of the pupil.
B	TA support	The pupil works on independent work in a suitable place within reach of the teacher and/or TA.
		The pupil works only with the TA for a substantial part of the time.
		The TA responds positively to the pupil and encourages him/her.
		The TA responds negatively to the pupil and reprimands or admonishes him or her.
C	Social-emotional learning	The TA guides the pupil in recognising his or her own emotions and thoughts and how they influence his or her behaviour and realising his or her own strengths and weaknesses and own value.
		The TA guides the pupil in managing his or her own emotions, thoughts and behaviour.
		The TA guides the pupil in development of relationship skills.
		The TA engages the pupil in decision-making.
		The TA supports the pupil's social empathy.

¹¹ TA is an abbreviation for teaching assistant used throughout the questionnaire and further in this text.

D	Class management	The TA develops the pupil's ability to co-create and respect rules and to expect others to follow rules.
		The TA explains to the pupil which behaviours are unacceptable in a comprehensible way.
		The TA supports the pupil's communication with the other pupils in the class.
		The TA exerts appropriate pressure on the pupil to formulate and articulate his or her thoughts (Why don't you like it? Why do you agree/disagree? Explain, etc.).
		The TA gives the pupil space to express his or her own experience, opinions and ideas.
E	Communication	The TA supports the pupil's communication with the other pupils in the class.
		The TA exerts appropriate pressure on the pupil to formulate and articulate his or her thoughts (Why don't you like it? Why do you agree/disagree? Explain, etc.).
		The TA gives the pupil space to express his or her own experience, opinions and ideas.
F	Pupil motivation	The TA's feedback or assessment motivates the pupil.
		The TA creates space for the pupil to pose questions and encourages him or her to do so.
		The TA supports the pupil's effective and safe engagement in group work.
		The TA praises the pupil when s/he works quickly.
		The TA responds negatively when the pupil works quickly.
G	Dealing with mistakes and responding to uncertainty	If the pupil makes mistakes or is uncertain when solving complex assignments, open questions, etc., the TA tries to find out whether s/he understands the task at hand. – in mathematics
		If the pupil makes mistakes or is uncertain when solving complex assignments, open questions, etc., the TA tries to find out whether s/he understands the task at hand. – in Czech language
		If the pupil makes mistakes or is uncertain when solving complex assignments, open questions, etc., the TA tells him or her exactly how to proceed or what to do. – in mathematics
		If the pupil makes mistakes or is uncertain when solving complex assignments, open questions, etc., the TA tells him or her exactly how to proceed or what to do. – in Czech language
		If the pupil makes mistakes or is uncertain when solving complex assignments, open questions, etc., the TA provides him or her with scaffolding that helps him or her move forward. – in mathematics

G	Dealing with mistakes and responding to uncertainty	If the pupil makes mistakes or is uncertain when solving complex assignments, open questions, etc., the TA provides him or her with scaffolding that helps him or her move forward. – in Czech language
		If the pupil makes mistakes or is uncertain when solving complex assignments, open questions, etc., the TA arranges help from a classmate. – in mathematics
		If the pupil makes mistakes or is uncertain when solving complex assignments, open questions, etc., the TA arranges help from a classmate. – in Czech language
H	Working with objectives, assessment and feedback	The TA is well aware of the objectives and content of the given lesson block (what will happen, the sequence of specific tasks or themes, what the children will learn, etc.). – in mathematics
		The TA is well aware of the objectives and content of the given lesson block (what will happen, the sequence of specific tasks or themes, what the children will learn, etc.). – in Czech language.
		The TA assesses the pupil's performance as correct or incorrect.
		The TA praises the pupil's efforts.
		The TA assesses the pupil's abilities (You are challenged in math, you are really good at art.).
		The TA's assessment of the pupil includes a formative component.
I	Individualisation and differentiation	The TA creates situations in which the pupil can experience success in mathematics.
		The TA creates situations in which the pupil can experience success in the Czech language subject.
		The TA creates situations in which the pupil can experience success in other areas.
		The TA individualises tasks for the pupil (modifies worksheets, the level of difficulty, etc.).
		The TA facilitates the use of didactic aids or other visual support for the pupil in an appropriate manner and to an appropriate extent.
J	General aspects of TA's work	The teacher and teaching assistant actively collaborate.
		The TA works with multiple children.
		For most of a lesson, the TA focuses solely on 1 or 2 selected children, and is associated with them in speech (Maruška, you take this – their work lags behind the work of class X, keeps up with the class in content, differs in format or level of difficulty).

In the research study, through the questionnaire survey, we strove to obtain a realistic image of the current state of teaching assistance in practice in schools for subsequent reflection on the implementation of the principle of cooperation at the pupil – teaching assistant – teacher level. For this reason we posed the same questions to the teachers of the classes in which the teaching assistants worked. We subsequently compared the answers to identify, in particular:

- a) **How the TAs support pupils with SEN in adjusting to the school environment and classroom** (groups A, C, D, E, J);
- b) **How the TAs support pupils with SEN during class and during preparation for class** (groups B, F, G, H, I), with particular emphasis on the core subjects taught in second and third grades;
- c) **Whether the principle of teacher-teaching assistant collaboration is fulfilled in the classroom** (groups D, H, J).

We complemented the results of the questionnaire survey with semi-structured interviews and direct observation of pupils with SEN in Czech language and mathematics classes. We subsequently statistically evaluated the data and determined the degree of relevance of performance of these tasks for pupils with SEN. We were therefore able to formulate practical recommendations about which activities TAs can be motivated to do, which areas could do with specification of the work of TAs and above all, what is the state of teaching assistance in practice in schools.

Practical recommendations: Our research questions reflect the areas in which TAs can be given a role. They can serve readers of our paper – practicing teachers – as an overview of minor tasks that are important, serve a function in the classroom in the context of inclusive education and correspond to the legislation.

Data processing and assessment

Group A – Classroom climate and well-being

The classroom climate is a longstanding constellation of socio-psychological phenomena characteristic of the given class and derived from the atmosphere of the school. It is modified by the group of classmates and peers, as well as the class teacher, and the teaching assistant forms an integral part of it (Horáčková, 2015). The social context of the classroom climate renders it unique, unrepeatable and diverse from classroom to classroom within a school and can therefore fundamentally impact a number of factors of educational success or failure. Horáčková (2015, p. 14) states that the “classroom climate has a significant role in motivating pupils to learn and towards educa-

tion in general. The teacher and teaching assistant can have a positive impact on the classroom climate by shaping a safe environment, supporting collaboration between integrated and intact pupils, showing personal commitment and serving as an example of enthusiasm for one's work, openness, listening, etc. On the other hand, even they can be the cause of tension, conflicts, fear, apathy or xenophobic attitudes that disrupt the process of inclusion."

It is gratifying to find that in most of the observed classes, the teacher and the teaching assistant take an active interest in the "being" of the pupil with SEN, although slightly greater support comes from the teachers. A positive classroom climate is further illustrated by the fact that the teachers do not excessively reprimand the pupils, admonish them or respond negatively to them and the TAs even less so (see assessment of group B for further details). A significant association was demonstrated between items assessing the classroom climate and well-being (group A), the quality of teacher-teaching assistant collaboration in the class (group B) and the work of the TA in general (group I). Where the quality of collaboration was assessed as very unsatisfactory, the work of the assistant in regard to interest in the child's well-being was also insufficient. Teachers and teaching assistants can strengthen the pupils' well-being by adopting a positive attitude and prevent possible school failure or at least create a positive and motivational educational environment.

Group B - TA's support of pupils with SEN

The collected data indicate that in aggregate, teachers provide more support than teaching assistants **to pupils with SEN**. Teachers' support is positive overall. The pupils are called on often, the teachers try to motivate them to do the work at hand and to encourage them through a positive attitude. In comparison to teachers' attitudes, teaching assistants are somewhat more passive in these supportive activities. We found the most pronounced difference in the item "*The TA responds to the pupil positively and encourages him or her.*" Here, too, the teachers were shown to be more active, even though we would expect that teaching assistants would be the more supportive element in instruction.

In overall comparison of the collected data, teaching assistants received only one relatively more positive evaluation than the teachers, namely in the case "*The TA responds to the pupil negatively, and reprimands or admonishes him or her.*". Since the teachers lead instruction, the result - that they are stricter in this item - could be anticipated. The teacher's reprimand or scolding of a pupil should be a direct impulse for the TA to actively initiate targeted intervention, support, activation, etc. of the pupil. In the survey we identified only one pupil, or one class, which received no support from either the teacher or the teaching assistant

In general, we could say that the teacher is the leader who introduces new stimuli into the class and the teaching assistant should actively respond to them. However, if the teacher introduces a new stimulus to the class and then discusses it with the class, there is no need to perceive the situation negatively, but rather as an opportunity for improvement.

Group C – Social-emotional learning

This area was assessed based on a set of ten items. Through these items, we described a set of skills that we strive to cultivate in pupils. These skills lead to increased self-awareness, attentiveness to others and improved communication skills, which in turn lead to an overall improvement in relational skills and social empathy. Both the teacher and the teaching assistant can work on improving pupils' social skills throughout each day and class. One of the prerequisites for developing pupils' social skills is that the teacher's own social skills must be well-developed.

In the first surveyed item, "*Recognizing own emotions*", we mapped to what extent pupils are guided by the teacher and the teaching assistant to reflect on their emotions/thoughts, formulate them subsequently and understand their impact on their own behaviour. The results show that teachers tend to be more active in this area. A third of the observed assistants received a mostly negative evaluation in this item. Again, it was in the classes where the teacher-teaching assistant collaboration was evaluated rather negatively.

If I teach a child to recognise their own emotions, the next step towards improving their social skills is that they **control their own emotions, thoughts and behaviour**. This area was the second assessed item. Analysis of this item showed, once again, that the teacher takes on a more proactive role. More than one half of the surveyed teachers of pupils with SEN explicitly developed this skill in pupils. A positive finding is that teachers were often in agreement with the teaching assistant, who was also quite proactive in this area. Nevertheless, in classrooms where the teacher did not proactively guide pupils towards self-regulation, the teaching assistant did not do so either.

In the next item, we looked at the quality of development of **relational skills**. These include building and maintaining healthy, two-way relationships, encouraging social proactivity and developing teamwork skills. Through these activities, the teaching staff transform a group of pupils into a classroom team sharing the same goals and values. Here, too, it turns out that the teacher is the more active agent in developing this particular social skill. This finding can again be interpreted as meaning that the teacher is the leader of the class. In most of the surveyed classes, the teaching assistant supports the teacher as the teacher's activity is evaluated as rather positive. However, we once again identified two classes where the teacher's and the

assistant's level of activity are at opposite ends of the scale, meaning that the teacher is very active and the teaching assistant is utterly inactive. These were classes where the teacher-teaching assistant collaboration was evaluated negatively.

In items 16 and 17, we examined the extent to which the teacher and the teaching assistant involve pupils in decision-making and empower them to take **responsibility for their decisions**. Through developing this skill, we guide students towards independence and personal responsibility. The collected data show that the development of this skill is primarily attributed to teachers and that teaching assistants received rather mediocre evaluations in this item.

In the last item that mapped social learning in the class, we assessed the **development of social empathy**. This criterion includes all activities that encourage pupils to show respect, empathy, and appreciation towards others. In more than half of the surveyed classes, the teacher and the teaching assistant are in agreement that they are both active facilitators of social empathy development in their class. However, we also identified some classes where this area was poorly developed or entirely neglected by the teacher and the teaching assistant. In this item, too, we saw that if the teacher does not develop the skill, the teaching assistant remains inactive.

Group D - Class management

In this item we were interested in the system of rules of behaviour in the classroom and their comprehensibility to pupils. We also conducted structured observations of the teaching staff responsible for compliance with classroom rules. In Czech schools, it is quite common for pupils to participate in the drafting of classroom rules. The list of rules is typically hung up on a classroom wall. Respect for the rules is not automatic and it is the teaching staff in the classrooms who help reinforce them. In our research, it turned out that, for pupils with SEN, the teacher is more active in helping them internalise classroom rules. A total of 30% of the observed teaching assistants did not participate in rule enforcement. It seems that in these cases the responsibility for correcting pupils' behaviour lies with the teachers - the formally dominant members of the teaching staff in the team.

When assessing class management, we also examined how comprehensibly forms of acceptable behaviour were explained to pupils with SEN, e.g. ... *There is no running in the hall during breaks, but you can stretch on a mat in the classroom*. The collected data show that in 60% of the cases both the teacher and the teaching assistant actively and comprehensibly correct their pupils' behaviour. In these cases, these are personal interactions with the pupil by both the teacher and the assistant. In the rest of the observed classes, teachers are again more proactive

in communicating desirable behaviour than teaching assistants. However, we also identified a class where only the teaching assistant communicated with the child with SEN about the desired form of behaviour.

Group E – Communication

In general, **communication with pupils with SEN is friendly and open** in the surveyed schools. Both teachers and teaching assistants give pupils with SEN the opportunity to express their own experiences, opinions, feelings, etc. Similarly as in Group B (TA support), teachers are assessed as more proactive and helpful in all surveyed and compared items in comparison to teaching assistants. When focusing on support of development of communication skills provided during breaks, group work, creative activities, and especially during individual work on specific assignments with a pupil with SEN, we would certainly expect the opposite result. Nevertheless, we should also admit that there are a significant number of variables that we were unable to capture in our research when evaluating the extent of functional communication.

The item *“The TA exerts appropriate pressure (Why do you like it? Why don’t you like it. Please explain.)”* targeted **instructional communication**, which is an important prerequisite for successful and effective schooling (according to Šed’ová et al., 2019). Not surprisingly, teachers are significantly more active in this regard than teaching assistants, and we even identified classes in which teaching assistants were completely uncommunicative and all activities were carried out by the teacher.

Group F – Pupil motivation

One of the basic building blocks of pupils’ motivation to learn is feedback from the teaching staff. Pupils with SEN need this feedback even more as they need to invest more effort in learning than pupils without learning difficulties. Analysis of items mapping the quality of the feedback provided by the teacher/teaching assistant to the child showed that only one quarter of teachers and teaching assistants provided functional, motivating feedback to pupils with SEN.

Group G – Dealing with mistakes

Making mistakes and the accompanying uncertainty, which can be a part of solving a more demanding task, are also an integral part of the learning process. For pupils with special educational needs, this is a very important area, because if they consistently experience failure, their motivation to continue learning decreases significantly.

In this group, we observed three situations that can occur when a pupil does not know how to accomplish an assignment. First, we tried to find out

if the teaching assistant would verify that the pupil understood the assignment. The second response which we assessed was whether the teacher or the assistant would guide the pupil through the precise steps of solving the assignment. In the third assessed response, the assistant provides scaffolding to guide the pupil towards a solution. We observed all of these situations in Czech language and mathematics classes. However, as we identified no differences between the observed subjects, we present them collectively.

If a pupil does not know the solution, we should first check if they understand the assignment. In 50% of the classes, teaching assistants reacted this way. In two classes only (i.e. 5%) were such checks carried out only occasionally. In the rest of the observed sample, we did not observe the teaching staff supporting pupils by posing questions to check whether pupils understood the question (neither the teacher nor the teaching assistant).

If we compare the other two remaining options for supporting the pupil, we see that assistants tend to choose the scaffolding approach where, instead of giving the pupil precise instructions for solving the assignment, they provide only clues that lead the pupil to solve the assignment independently.

Group H – Working with objectives, assessment and feedback

This item addressed specifically the teaching process in a broader context as well as the teaching of individual subjects. Primarily (given the overall structure of the research) we focused on the core subjects in which pupils are often perceived as “failing”, i.e. Czech language and literature and mathematics. The basic starting point for cooperation between the two members of the teaching staff has to be mutual openness, sharing of information and an effort to take a constructive approach during classes. Therefore, the results for the item *“The TA is well aware of the objectives and content of the given lesson block”* were very alarming. According to our findings, in most schools, **TAs do not have even a general understanding of the content of the given lesson block before the start of the class or a particular lesson.** If we look at the definition of the job duties of a TA, then this shortcoming can certainly be perceived as a fundamental deficiency that can negatively affect the course and implementation of a TA’s activities from which pupils with SEN should benefit, but also as a fundamental deficiency that erodes the principle of cooperation in an inclusive education setting. Interestingly, in group J (see below) both teachers and TAs were assessed as collaborating seamlessly. However, if we see that the teacher does not communicate sufficiently with the TA about the structure of the teaching lesson and does not provide the TA with information about what topics will be covered in the class and what the TA’s tasks will be, we cannot describe the collaboration as seamless and functional.

The other two items examined whether **teachers or TAs evaluate the pupil’s performance as correct or incorrect.** In item 50, which assessed the work

of teachers, affirmative answers clearly prevailed. This can be considered a fairly expected result, as it is natural for teachers to do this by default when teaching. On the other hand, **item 51**, which looked at **whether TAs evaluate the pupil's performance as correct or incorrect**, revealed that they do so only slightly less frequently than teachers but that the majority does so. Consideration should be given to the extent to which TAs have the **qualifications required for teaching** to be able to competently correct mistakes. As far as the evaluation of other items is concerned, we can state that teaching assistants in the observed classes actively participated in the pupil's evaluation, they stressed the effort exerted by the pupil and their evaluation to a large extent also included a formative component.

As far as the **evaluation of pupils' abilities** is concerned, discordant responses clearly prevailed, both among teachers and TAs. Here it is necessary to point out the limitations of the research. If we consider the process of acquiring a skill or ability as a long-term process (as opposed to performance, which is a short-term process), then the design of the research did not create enough space for the evaluators to make conclusions.

Group I – Individualisation and differentiation

Individualisation and differentiation are two basic principles which are absolutely essential for the successful education of pupils with special educational needs. This group consisted of a total of 12 items focusing on assessment of specific teacher or teaching assistant practices. Specifically, we were concerned with: opportunities to experience success in Czech language and mathematics classes, opportunities to experience success in other areas of the child's school life, individualisation of teaching materials in Czech language and mathematics, and the provision of adequate use of didactic aids and visual support.

The majority of teachers created situations in which the child could experience success in mathematics and Czech language instruction. It was surprising to find that teaching assistants, whose primary task is to give their attention to children with SEN, are more passive in this area.

Group J – General aspects of TA's work

The work of TAs and the degree of their cooperation with teachers was evaluated as rather positive. However, we often encountered situations where teaching assistance was recommended by the school counselling centre to a specific pupil, yet teachers started to use the teaching assistant for several pupils at the same time or in a different way. Often, they argued for this practice either on the basis of ensuring equal access (quote: *"so that a pupil with SEN would not feel different, excluded"*), or by claiming that the pupil actually did not need assistance (quote: *"but that girl is so smart that I often use her*

to assist other children; she actually doesn't need an assistant"). None of these decisions, which were made in contradiction to the school counselling centre's recommendation based on an examination of the pupil, were preceded by professional consultation as to whether the teacher could do such a thing. We know for a fact that this tendency – "to use assistants in a different way than they were originally intended" – is very common in school practice. Therefore, we believe that the principle of teamwork should be accepted and perceived as the main pillar on which successful inclusive education can be built.

Conclusions

As part of the evaluation of the data on teaching assistance, we asked 3 key questions, namely:

- a) **How the TAs support pupils with SEN in adjusting to the school environment and classroom** (groups A, C, D, E, J);
- b) **How the TAs support pupils with SEN during class and during preparation for class** (groups B, F, G, H, I), with particular emphasis on the core subjects taught in second and third grades;
- c) **Whether the principle of teacher-teaching assistant collaboration is fulfilled in the classroom** (groups D, H, J).

Ad a)

The results of the research showed that pupils with SEN are educated in a stimulating, friendly and motivational environment, which is mainly created by teachers and, to a lesser extent, by teaching assistants. The climate at the schools is motivational, no major communication barriers arise. This is a positive finding, especially considering the fact that we know examples from practice where *"there is a conflict between the teacher and the teaching assistant, which blocks communication and sharing of necessary information about the pupil and the work. In such cases, the teacher "teaches the whole class" and the assistant just sits with the pupil and works with them in some way."* (Horáčková, 2015, p. 19). Nevertheless, a **timely** erudite intervention to address the needs of pupils with difficulties and, where appropriate, the timely introduction of a TA must be identified as the primary basis for successful education of pupils with SEN in inclusive education settings. Therefore, we can conclude that the situation in the surveyed schools is good. If we focus on the general context of school education, the interviews showed that cooperation with the family was effective – when the pupil is found to manifest inadequate learning abilities, there is an effort to contact the family and the family is more likely to try to look for a functional solution to the matter.

Ad b)

The research survey showed that schools often organise tutoring sessions led either by classroom teachers or by teaching assistants. When working with a pupil with SEN, it is important to accept the higher fatigability of the pupil and to choose tutoring on days when pupils have less cognitively demanding subjects and fewer classes. However, schools systemically operate in this way. In the context of cooperation, the **role of the family** seemed to be underemphasised, which often closely correlates with overall interest in the child. The question is to what extent we can require family involvement in a systemic way, i.e. not only on a voluntary basis.

Ad c)

The principle of collaboration is not applied at all levels as we would expect, for example TAs in many schools do not have access to even a basic outline of the content of given lessons. Collaboration in the actual teaching process is not always effective, and the research results show that there is a need for more communication about the activities that the TA should/can do in the class. On the other hand, it is quite clear that cooperation influencing the educational environment is positive, friendly and to a greater extent motivational. Such an educational environment is a crucial prerequisite for school success. From the perspective of all three evaluated aspects, **teamwork** emerges as the principle that must not be impaired.

Summary

The work of a teaching assistant supporting pupils with SEN is influenced by a number of specific factors, both on the professional and on the personal level. The most important of these can be considered to be the type of school, the grade, the degree and effectiveness of cooperation with the teacher or the teaching staff as well as the personality or qualification prerequisites of the teaching assistant; but above all it is significantly dependent on the type of special needs of specific pupils with SEN and the degree of their manifestation in the educational process. Another decisive factor is whether the teaching assistant works with one pupil or with a group of several pupils. The implementation of basic pedagogical assistance activities is directly subject to these influences and the degree of their fulfilment or failure to fulfil them can ultimately significantly influence the process of creating a successful or unsuccessful educational environment for a pupil with SEN in an inclusive education setting.

Authors contributions

The authors confirms being the sole contributor of this work.

REFERENCES

Studies

- Booth, T., Ainscow, M. (2002). *Index for inclusion: Developing learning and participation in schools*. Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education (CSIE), Rm 2S203 S Block, Frenchay Campus, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol BS16 1QU, United Kingdom, England
- Eliášková, K. (2021). *Diferenciace cílů jako možnost pro efektivní výuku žáků se speciálními vzdělávacími potřebami* [Differentiation of objectives as a possibility for effective teaching of pupils with special educational needs]. *Didaktické studie*, 13(2), 15-28
- Eliášková, K., Štěpáník, S. (2022). *Inovace výuky českého jazyka ve speciálně pedagogických souvislostech* [Innovations in Czech language teaching in the context of special education]. *Speciální pedagogika*, 32(1-2), 77-92
- Hájková, V. et al. (2018). *Asistent pedagoga – profese utvářená v dialogu* [Teaching assistant – a profession shaped in dialogue]. Prague: Charles University
- Hájková, V., Květoňová Švecová, L., Němec, Z., Strnadová, I. (2018). *Asistent pedagoga – profese utvářená v dialogu* [Teaching assistant – a profession shaped in dialogue]. Prague: Charles University
- Horáčková, I. (2015). *Metodika práce asistenta pedagoga – spolupráce s učitelem* [Methodology of work of the teaching assistant – collaboration with the teacher]. *Systémová podpora inkluzivního vzdělávání v ČR* [Systemic support for inclusive education in the Czech Republic]. Olomouc: Palacký University Olomouc
- Kendíková, J. (2020). *Vademecum asistenta pedagoga* [Teaching assistant's handbook]. Prague: Pasparta
- Němec, Z., Šimáčková-Laurenčíková, K., Hájková, V. (2014). *Asistent pedagoga v inkluzivní škole* [Teaching assistants in inclusive school environments]. Prague: Charles University
- Němec, Z., Šimáčková-Laurenčíková, K., Hájková, V. (2014b). *Co změnit na práci asistentů pedagoga?* [What should be changed about the work of teaching assistants?] *Pedagogika*, 64(2), 200-211
- Němec, Z., Michalík, J. (2015). *Systémové vymezení pozice asistenta pedagoga v českém školství* [Systematic definition of the teaching assistant position in the Czech education system]. In: Morávková Vejrochová, M., et al. *Standard práce asistenta pedagoga* [Standard of teaching assistants' work] (pp. 12-19). Olomouc: Palacký University Olomouc
- Němec et al. (2014). *Asistent pedagoga v inkluzivní škole* [Teaching assistant in an inclusive school]. Prague: Karolinum
- Růžička, M., Smolíková, M., Flekačová, L., Baslerová, P. et al. (2019). *Učitel a asistent ve společném vzdělávání* [Teachers and assistants in inclusive education]. Olomouc: Palacký University Olomouc
- Šedřová et al. (2019). *Výuková komunikace* [Educational communication]. Brno: Masaryk University Brno
- Šmelová, E., Souralová, E., Petrová, A. (2017). *Social aspects of elementary school inclusion in the context of international research*. Translated by Tomáš Vacek. Olomouc: Palacký University Olomouc
- Webster, R., Blatchford, P., Basset, P., Brown, P., Martin, C., Russell, A. (2010). *Double standards and first principles: framing teaching assistant support for pupils with special education needs*. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 4, 319-336

Legal acts

Act No. 108/2006 Coll., On Social Services. (available online at: <https://www.zakonyprolidi.cz/cs/2006-108>)

Online resources

<https://www.zakonyprolidi.cz/cs/2016-27#cast2>

<https://www.zakonyprolidi.cz/cs/2004-563?text=563%2F2004+Sb.>

https://maturita.ceremat.cz/files/files/zakon-vyhlaska/2021-2022/vyhlas-ka_177-20091-1-2022_vyzn_zmeny.pdf