

SUPPORT TEAM FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN LATVIAN SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

By analysing the challenges of special education in the 21st century, it has been concluded that implementation of an inclusive approach in general education schools is one such challenge. An important element of developing an inclusive education system is the support team at the school.

The aim of this article is to describe the currently available personnel, and the personnel necessary for education and support of children with special needs in the educational process. We will analyse the education of the personnel involved regarding the requirements of special education, the existence of support teams and the specialists involved and needed, comparing the experiences of general education and special education schools.

For this descriptive design empirical research, we have used data acquired by surveys and used methods of descriptive statistics to process the answers.

Research results indicate the need for widening the access to professional development programmes for pedagogues in the field of special (inclusive) education to strengthen the professional competence of pedagogues. The survey shows that currently in Latvian schools the subject teachers are the ones that largely contribute to the support activities (e.g., preparation of suitable learning materials) and greater support has been requested regarding accessibility of learning materials, as well as a wider range of available methodical materials.

Keywords: inclusive education, school support team, supporting personnel, child with special needs.

Introduction

In Latvia, until the 1990s, general education institutions had no unit for school support personnel, and only the help of a speech therapist was available to the youngest pupils. It was not until the 21st century, when Latvia started to move towards an inclusive approach, that general education schools began creating permanent support personnel positions, such as school psychologist, special educator and social pedagogue. Research indicates that a support team is a formation element of an inclusive education system (Barrow, 2013; Rozenfelde, 2016; Tübele & Vigante, 2014) and, furthermore, it is a significant support factor in teachers' professional activity.

The aim of the article is to describe what personnel is available now, and what kind of personnel would be needed for the education of children with special needs and for providing them with support during the educational process.

The article analyses the current situation in Latvian educational institutions, both in general and in special schools. It analyses the education of the personnel involved in the field of special education, the presence of a support team, and the specialists involved and needed, comparing the experiences of general and special schools. This article was prepared during the Study on the Financial Model for the Education of Children with Special Needs in Latvia, conducted by Raščevska, et al, 2017. The research was carried out by scientists from the University of Latvia under the order of the Latvian Ministry of Education and Science from May 2017 until December 2017.

Methodology

In order to collect data for the descriptive design empirical research, we have used data acquired by survey and methods of descriptive statistics to process the answers

The survey of teachers from general education institutions (TGEI) had 280 respondents. Since there was a significant number of school management representatives in this sample, this sample was categorised into two subgroups: teachers (211 in total) and school management representatives (69 in total).

Two hundred sixty-three respondents participated in a survey of teachers from special education institutions (TSEI).

The results of the survey may be influenced by the level of training of the respondents in the field of special education. Many teachers (48%) note that they have no education in this area. Only 15% of teachers indicate

that they have a special teacher/pedagogue or speech therapist education (obtained at bachelor or master level). Approximately 30% of teachers have completed a 72-hour course training in special pedagogy. Furthermore, most of the teachers who chose the *Other education* response (7%) indicate either a smaller extent of special course training or that they are studying in that field.

Research questions:

- 1) Are there any support personnel teams in special and general education schools?
- 2) What specialists are involved in the teams?
- 3) What kind of specialists would be needed for the operation of a support team?
- 4) What is the frequency of team meetings?

Literature Review

A support team should provide support for the classroom teacher, help reduce the difficulties a pupil may face in the classroom or outside the class hours, and support pupils as well as parents. Researchers point out that the lack of professional support in educational institutions can lead to a crisis, given that the personnel of the educational institution do not understand what to do in difficult situations (Giangreco, Suter, & Hurley, 2013).

If there is a support personnel group in an educational institution, it does not automatically lead to teamwork. Poorly coordinated and individual work of even highly professional specialists in various fields does not lead to the expected result.

An essential aspect of the support team work is the cooperation and collaboration of specialists and subject teachers. Research on pedagogue collaboration with a special education teacher shows that many teachers consider working with support personnel as an interference in their work, as a burden rather than help. Situations where the support teams were given an official time for planning, discussion, and evaluation were assessed as positive (Lacey, 2001; Milteniene & Venclovaite, 2012). This indicates the need to provide time resources for teacher collaboration with the support team.

A team is characterized by united management, common goals, mutual cooperation, and conditions of confidentiality (i.e., when team members share information while solving problems, the boundaries of confidentiality are widened but not broken since no information is disclosed outside the team).

Optimally, the support team consists of a member of administration (deputy director, educational methodologist, director), a psychologist,

a special pedagogue/teacher of special education, a social pedagogue, a speech therapist, a teacher's aide, a medical worker, and a teacher (class teacher, subject teacher), while parents are also invited to attend the meetings.

Work of the team involves close collegial cooperation in defining a problem (such as a pupil's difficulties in the learning process), putting forward hypotheses, discussing solutions, elaborating a detailed plan for the activities of each party involved, and setting deadlines for evaluating the decision, adjusting the action plan if necessary (Newton, Todd, Algozzine, Horner & Algozzine, 2009).

The task of the support team is to develop pupils' individual development plans, meet regularly, support and monitor the implementation of the plan, analyse the effectiveness of plans, manage the resources of the school and community that need to be used, report to the school administration on the trends of the support domain, make proposals for the school development plan, and support pupils, teachers and parents.

Results

One of the areas of working with special needs pupils is the mutual collaboration of school personnel, that is the creation of a team within the school dedicated to work with special needs pupils.

A comparatively positive experience of setting up school teams in educational institutions is evidenced by the survey results, which indicate that, in most schools, such teams have been created. However, 14% of general education institution management representatives say that no such team has been set up in their school. Whereas among the surveyed pedagogues this answer was provided by 9% of general education school pedagogues and 4% of special education institution pedagogues.

By studying the experience of the schools surveyed, it can be concluded that a large number of Latvian schools have established rules of procedure for their school support team, which are also available on their school websites.

Among those surveyed, 45% of general school management representatives, 29% of general school pedagogues and 41% of special education pedagogues report that they regularly work in a support team (see Figure 1), while around 30% of respondents in all groups report that they work in a support team if necessary.

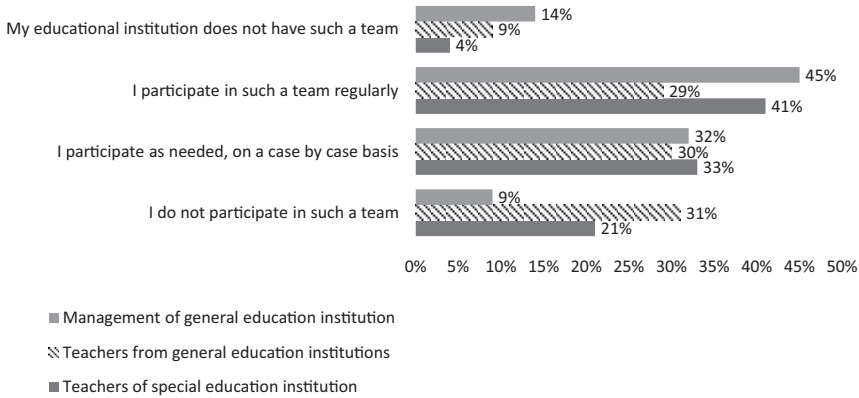


Figure 1. Participation in a team dealing with special education issues

The results of the survey on what kind of specialists participate in school support teams indicate that the most common team members are a speech therapist and a psychologist (see Figure 2). However, other specialists are indicated varyingly: 57% of TGEI survey respondents report that their team has a class teacher, and 65% of TSEI survey respondents provide this answer.

There was a greater number of special pedagogue and medical personnel among teams in special educational institutions. This is to be expected because, when implementing a special education programme, recruitment of such specialists is greater. This fact has to be taken into account, implementing the integration of special needs learners in general education schools will require greater availability of these specialists.

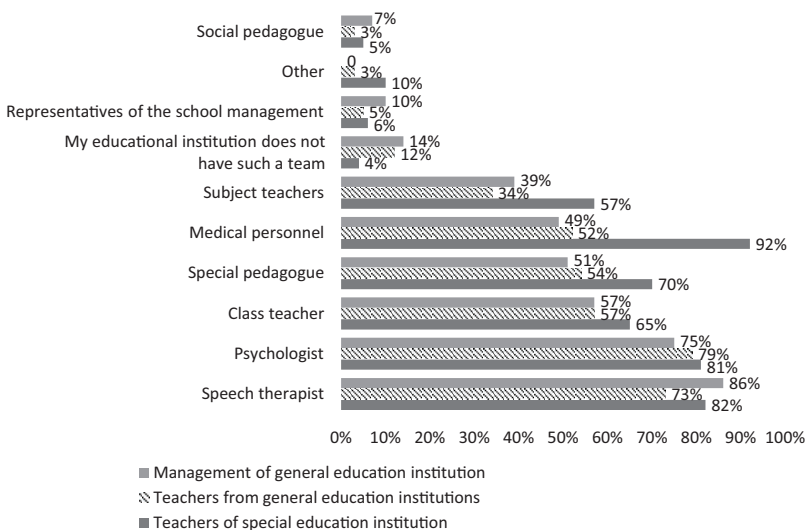


Figure 2. Specialists working in support team

A wider range of additional personnel in educational institutions that implement special education programmes is also evidenced by the results of the TSEI pedagogue survey where pupils with special needs have access not only to a speech therapist, psychologist, nurse, social pedagogue and special pedagogue, but also, for example, a teacher aide, therapeutic exercise teacher, doctor, canistherapist, masseur, music therapist, or motion therapist.

Educational institutions have different experiences in setting up support teams, thus suggestions on what additional specialists need to be included in such a team are also very different. Only 7% of school heads say that all specialists are already involved. Most frequently the respondents indicate that the team should include a special pedagogue (see Figure 3). Respondents of the TSEI survey indicate that it is important to include a psychologist (36%) and a class teacher (29%). It is noteworthy that in the TGEI survey, 32% indicate that the team should include medical personnel. All respondent groups report a subject teacher's participation in teamwork.

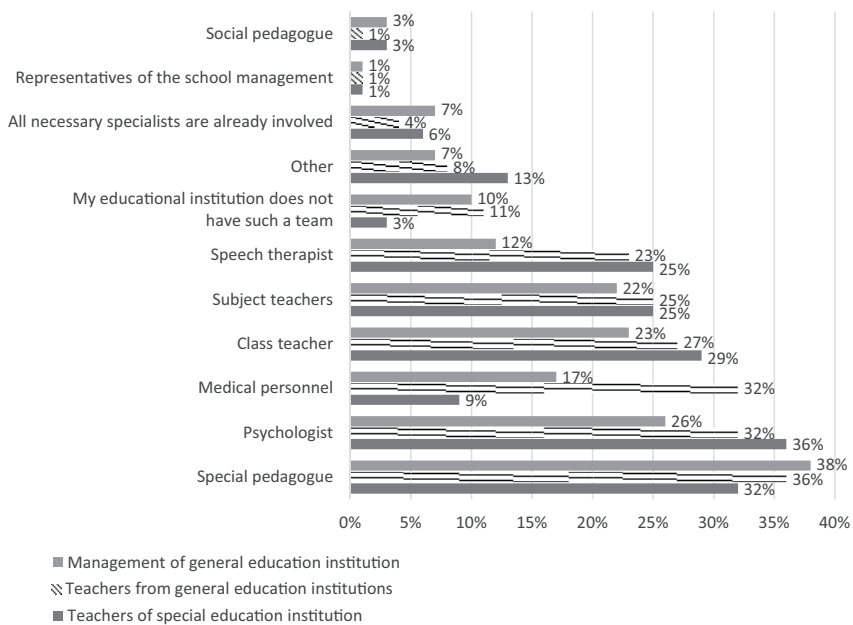


Figure 3. Specialists needed in support team work

The rules of procedure for each school support team may define varied team functions, however, the most frequently stated is individual programme planning. School management representatives and participants of the TSEI survey, 61% and 56% respectively, indicate that they decide on the choice of support measures. The third most important function mentioned in

the survey responses is the creation of a research/diagnosis plan. It can be concluded that the support team work is more related to support planning, rather than the analysis function which is performed much less frequently: 33% of pedagogues and 39% of management representatives indicate that they perform evaluation of development progress. However, this would be an important step in determining the effectiveness of support measures and in planning further support. It is possible that support teams have not yet established a culture of feedback analysis, they focus on first-time case consideration and planning, leaving evaluation up to the subject teacher. It can also be related to limited time resources.

The irregular frequency of the support team meetings on joint work is demonstrated by a survey in which 26% of the educational institution management representatives indicate that the team meetings are held once or twice a month, and 48% hold the meetings around a few times a semester (see Figure 4). Pedagogues indicate a lower frequency of such meetings.

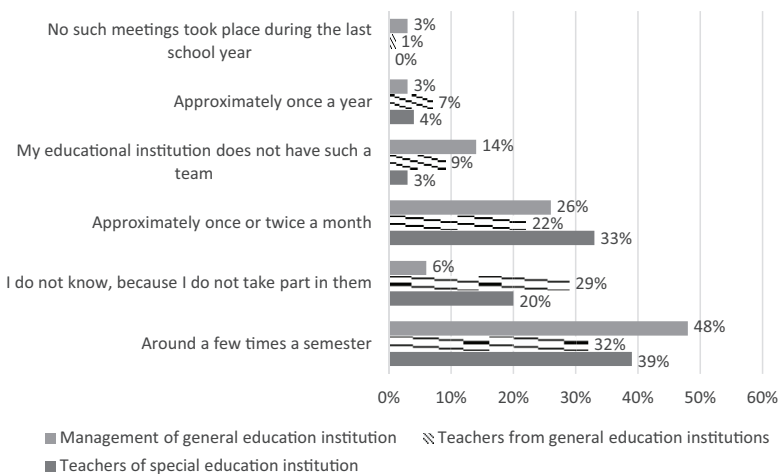


Figure 4. Frequency of team meetings

When it comes to supporting pupils with special educational need, an important element is selecting and creating teaching materials appropriate for the pupil. The results of the TSEI survey indicate that this function is most often carried out by the pedagogues themselves: 63% indicate that they prepare the materials themselves and 64% adapt the study materials or search the Internet.

Individual preparation of teaching materials is an additional task for the pedagogue; therefore, it is important to strengthen the cooperation among teachers, the involvement of support personnel and the use of resource centres. Regarding support needed for the pedagogues themselves in terms

of methodology, 59% of pedagogues and 74% of school management point out that the most needed are ready-to-use methodological materials and a wider range of methodological materials. Regarding personnel, pedagogues also express the need for a second pedagogue in the classroom (32%), a teacher aide (51%), or the opportunity to invite a special pedagogue (22%).

Respondents expressed the need to strengthen the professional competence of pedagogues as well; they need easy access to pedagogical literature (14% of pedagogues), the opportunity to consult on topical issues at school (14%), regular attendance of further education courses (26%), and additional knowledge on the special needs of each pupil (49%). Likewise, pedagogues point to the need to use technical aids (38%) and to adapt premises (30%). Various external (financial, technical) resources are required to provide such support, but mutual collaboration between teachers in a support team can also contribute to addressing the issues identified.

Conclusions and Suggestions

The results of the research indicate the necessity to provide as broad access as possible to pedagogical professional development programmes in special (inclusive) education in order to strengthen the professional competence of pedagogues. The results of the pedagogues' survey illustrate that pupils with SEN and the teachers themselves do not always receive the necessary support and deal with issues within their pedagogical competence.

In order to provide the SEN pupils with the necessary support in the learning process, schools create support teams whose activities are regulated by the educational institutions themselves, so the range of professionals working in these teams, the functions performed, and the regularity of team cooperation vary. In order for the support team to be helpful to both the pupil and the teacher in the day-to-day learning process, there should be a regular cooperation of the team of specialists, that would not only be aimed at planning, but also at assessing the effectiveness of the support measures. The support teams in general education schools should have more involvement of special pedagogues, whereas in the support teams of special education institutions should have more social pedagogues and psychologists involved. It is advisable for the support team to include specialists such as a special pedagogue, social pedagogue, speech therapist, medical personnel representative, and school administration representative. For support in particular cases, the teacher of the particular subject and the class teacher should also be involved.

The work of the support team should take place on a regular basis, meetings should convene at least twice a month, if necessary, assessing, for example, the individual plan executed for the education programme acquisition of the learner. However, in cases, such as those with behavioural disorders, the monitoring of the plan should be more frequent. In turn, the everyday task of the support team specialists is to provide the pupil with diverse support and provide the pedagogue with methodological support.

A study on the cost model for support services for children with special needs in the context of inclusive education (Raščevska et al., 2017) concludes that the number of support personnel workers at an educational institution should be related to the number of pupils in that educational institution or in the Support and Counselling Centres serving these schools, setting certain regulations, for example, one psychologist per 600 pupils and one speech therapist per 200 pupils, as well as the number of special programmes implemented in the educational establishments with integrated children with special educational needs.

If the regulations would change to stipulate that the statements issued by the State Pedagogical Medical Commission shall be an administrative act, then the functions of the school support team would be to prepare and provide the support measures stipulated by these statements.

If it is not possible to ensure the availability of support specialists and support measures at each educational institution, such support teams can be formed according to the territorial principle, one per several educational institutions, by concentrating support specialist services at either the municipal or regional level, thus creating resource centres accessible to educational institutions and parents.

The results of the survey indicate that at the moment a large contribution in preparation of support measures (suitable study materials) is only provided by the subject teachers, yet the need is expressed for more support in the availability of study materials, in particular the ready-to-use methodological materials and a broader range of methodological materials.

In order to provide more targeted support to learners with special needs, especially when implementing the principle of inclusive education, there is a need for additional pedagogical resources, such as a second pedagogue in the classroom, teacher assistant, or external special pedagogue.

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