



THE ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE SCHOOL SUPPORT TEAM IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN KINDERGARTENS

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Abstract

Inclusive education presents a significant challenge for contemporary society. All children should have the opportunity to develop according to their educational needs within an inclusive environment. The effectiveness of the school support team plays a crucial role in achieving this goal. This research aimed to explore the perspectives of teaching staff in kindergartens, including headmasters, teachers, and teaching assistants, regarding inclusive education, with a specific focus on their views and attitudes towards the roles of school special educators and teaching assistants in preschool education. A mixed-methods research strategy was employed to achieve this aim. Data were collected using a self-constructed questionnaire containing both closed and open items, completed by 394 respondents from 142 kindergartens. The findings indicated that teaching staff perceived the existence of a school support team as having a positive impact on addressing various children's issues and enhancing teachers' work. These results contribute to a broader understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the members of a school support team in kindergartens.

Keywords: *inclusive education, kindergarten, preschool education, school special educator, school support team, teaching assistant*

Introduction

An international trend in promoting inclusive education for all children in their natural environment is the reduction of the number of children educated in separate schools and classes for those with special educational needs. However, some European countries still have a high number of such segregated children, which contradicts the aforementioned international commitments and trends. For example, in Slovakia, the proportion of children with special educational needs is the fourth highest in Europe, comprising almost a fifth of the primary school population. Unlike many other European countries, a large proportion of these children in Slovakia do not attend mainstream primary schools alongside their peers. Slovakia ranks first among European countries in the proportion of children educated separately in special classes or schools for children with special educational needs (European Agency for the Development of Special and Inclusive Education, 2014; Hall et al., 2019; Klein, 2020). Addressing this unfavourable situation requires the implementation of inclusive education. The current societal challenge is to embrace the concept of inclusive education, rooted in the essence of inclusion: mutual acceptance and the promotion of a gradual shift toward unconditional acceptance of diversity through lifelong education. This approach is fundamental to an inclusive society, aiming for equality for all people without distinction.

Literature Review

The educational system in Slovakia reflects the significant need to tailor education and learning to each child's individual needs and to support their development through lifelong learning within an inclusive education framework. This necessitates improving the quality of human resources in schools, introducing innovation, and enhancing the efficiency of not only teaching and professional staff but also all stakeholders involved in providing care, assistance and support to children. Establishing a school support team and ensuring its effective operation is crucial for creating an inclusive, supportive environment that enables all children to reach their maximum potential. A school support team is a group of professionals working in kindergarten, primary schools, and secondary schools to support children with special educational needs, as well as teachers and parents (School Support Team: A Theoretical and Practical Guide, 2022). These teams typically comprise a variety of professionals, including school special educators, school psychologists, social educators, speech and language therapists and other specialists essential for addressing children's special educational needs. For the first time, the concept of a school support team is officially included in the following laws: the Act of the National Assembly of the Slovak Republic No. 245/2008 Coll. on Education and Training (School Act) and the Act of the National Assembly of the Slovak Republic No. 138/2019 Coll. on Teaching and Professional Staff. According to these legislative norms, the headmaster of a kindergarten, primary school, or secondary school may establish a school support team for the purpose of inclusive education. The school's special education teacher and other professional staff are members of the school's support team. Other teaching staff may also be part of the school support team. The optimal composition of the school support team includes: school special educator and field special educator, psychologist and school psychologist, social educator, speech therapist and school speech therapist, therapeutic educator, career counsellor, prevention coordinator, class teacher, other teachers, tutors in the school children's club, and teaching assistant.

The school support team performs the following tasks. Members of the team are involved in identifying special educational needs. Based on these identified needs, the school support team proposes individual or group support interventions. Furthermore, the team provides advice and methodological support to teachers in various situations within the educational process, aiding in the implementation of specific approaches and strategies for inclusive education. In doing so, it contributes to strengthening teachers' competencies to address challenges in line with the principles of inclusive education. Cooperation with teachers is essential in setting up necessary adjustments and appropriate teaching materials and aids.

Members of the school support team collaborate with children's legal representatives, providing them with information and procedures to address dysfunctional communication. They also monitor the effectiveness of implemented measures and adjust them as needed. Additionally, they organise and participate in various forms of further training to enhance their educational and professional competencies. The team offers a comprehensive perspective on the individual problems and difficulties faced by children in at-risk situations and supports the creation of a positive school climate.

Other tasks include the following: Coordinating educational and professional practices in close cooperation with support and prevention facilities. Participating in the development of the school's educational programme. Adapting the content of education to the individual needs of each child by modifying methods, forms, content, assessment, and classification. Contributing to the dissemination of inclusive education, thus eliminating prejudice and various forms of discrimination. Promoting open communication and cooperation among the different members of the school community in the educational process, including informal communication.

The school special educator plays a key role in inclusive education as a member of the school support team. Their primary responsibility is to perform diagnostic activities.

They provide professional help and special educational counselling to children and their legal representatives within the framework of special educational intervention. Additionally, they offer methodological support to the teaching and professional staff of the school, supply information to counselling and prevention institutions, and participate in developing individual educational programmes, especially for children with special educational needs. They may also carry out direct educational activities.

An essential part of the school support teams is the *school psychologist* who provides psychological diagnosis of children, crisis intervention, professional help, and psychological counselling within the framework of psychological intervention. The school psychologist offers various forms of psychological support to children, their families, and, where possible, school staff in the field of education and training. They participate in implementing preventive activities, improving and optimising relationships within classroom teams, and identifying children with special educational needs.

In primary and secondary schools, the *social pedagogue* plays an important role, particularly by identifying potential difficulties in social relationships and providing early intervention. The social pedagogue performs activities to prevent the aggravation or recurrence of risky behaviour. They collaborate with teachers, legal representatives of the children, and other members of the school support team.

The *therapeutic educator*, a member of the school support team, provides individual or group preventive and interventional therapeutic-educational support to children, their legal representatives, teaching and professional staff of the school. Their primary activities focus mainly on children with developmental risks.

The *school speech therapist* conducts speech therapy orientation diagnostics and then provides speech therapy interventions and counselling for children with impaired communication skills. They also offer counselling to the children's legal representatives and coordinate with teaching and professional staff in the education of children with impaired communication skills.

An integral part of the educational process is the *pedagogical assistant*, who plays a direct role in balancing the differences among children in the classroom. According to the requirements of the teacher and other educators, and in cooperation with members of school support teams, the teaching assistant creates equality of opportunity in education and training, helping children overcome various barriers.

Several research studies address the issue of inclusive education. Many of them no longer question whether inclusion in education should be implemented, but rather focus on how it should be specifically implemented in school settings. In developed countries such as Finland, the USA, the UK, Denmark, Norway, Sweden and others, inclusive education is already being implemented, and research is focused on examining its outcomes and effectiveness. However, the situation in Slovakia is different. The education system in Slovakia is highly segregated, and school inclusion is only in its early stages. Kožárová (2022a, 2022b) cited examples of good practices from abroad where curriculum modification, which respects the inclusive paradigm in education, has brought numerous benefits to the educational outcomes of both children with special educational needs and other children. Curriculum inclusivity, along with personalisation tailored to children and their needs, was most successful where school support teams were an integral part of the school. Numerous scientific studies (e.g. Cabanová & Trnka, 2021; Čarnická et al., 2023; Kušnírová et al., 2023; Šilonová et al., 2021; Zhu et al., 2019) advocate for inclusive education, starting from preschool. The ultimate implementers of this approach are teaching and professional staff, whose perspectives from the field provide valuable feedback on the current state of inclusive education and what improvements are needed to benefit all stakeholders.

The success of implementing inclusive education is highly dependent on the attitudes and opinions of teaching and professional staff in kindergartens, primary schools, and secondary schools. The first authors to address the issue of measuring the level of inclusion in

school settings were Booth and Ainscow, who created the Index for Inclusion in 2002. In 2004, Booth, Ainscow, and Kingston published a scientific monograph that, among other things, focused on preschool education and early childcare. Preschool education is the specific focus of the ICP's The Inclusive Classroom Profile (2021), which measures the quality and level of inclusion in kindergarten classrooms. The six-year field research by the authors of *Solid foundations: Leading change in a kindergarten* focused on document analysis and interviews with kindergarten teachers, which allowed them to identify seven practical principles of inclusive education: taking personal responsibility for each child; demonstrating self-control and providing rational solutions; offering children opportunities for meaningful activities; building a learning curriculum; instilling children with the skills of independent choice; facilitating learning in stages; and guiding children to acquire skills related to learning (Shoval & Sharir, 2019).

In Hong Kong, inclusive education has been promoted in schools since the 1990s and has now been extended to preschool education. However, without qualified teachers and sufficient resources, it is difficult to implement inclusive education in the kindergarten environment. The authors presented *Implementing inclusive education in an early childhood setting: A case study of a Hong Kong kindergarten* explored how inclusive education is implemented in a mainstream kindergarten in Hong Kong (Zhu et al., 2019). The study involved children with special educational needs, teachers, parents, and the school headmaster employing a triangulation of research methods: observation, interviews, and document analysis. The results showed that a variety of inclusive practices were implemented in the kindergarten, and despite challenges and difficulties, all case study participants expressed positive attitudes toward the inclusive programme (Zhu et al., 2019). Kubánová and Kontseková (2015) addressed good examples of inclusive education practices in the UK, with an emphasis on the education of Roma children. They analysed the state of preschool education through the implementation of the Sure Start programme. The aim of this project was to find solutions for working with families in poor communities and to contribute to the development of preschool children through parental education. This publication also includes the creation of tools to assess the level of inclusion in kindergartens.

Gladush (2018, 2020) has long focused on preparing future teachers and special educators to work in inclusive education settings. In the kindergarten environment, the process of introducing inclusive education in Ukrainian preschools began in 2013 with the implementation of the All-Ukrainian Step by Step Foundation's Ukraine-Canada project entitled "Inclusive Education for Children with Special Needs in Ukraine" (Hrabovets et al., 2022).

Belešová and Kuchtová (2018) published an empirical study that reviews topics and scientific findings from research on preschool education in the Slovak Republic between 2005 and 2015. The main aim of the study was to analyse the themes addressed in the research on preschool children's education. The research also addressed the issue of inclusion, such as the inclusion of Roma children and children with disadvantages. For Roma children, it was found that they make progress in mixed groups, but they are largely influenced, often negatively, by their family environment. The inclusion of disadvantaged children in kindergartens was considered beneficial for both disadvantaged and typically developing children. However, the research also indicated a negative aspect: the low preparedness of educators in working in inclusive education and shortcomings in legislative documents on this issue.

The results of the analysis of the *It Makes Sense* initiative showed that only 20% of teaching and professional staff believed their school was ready to educate children with special educational needs (Hall et al., 2020). A large proportion of kindergarten staff felt that the best form of education for this group of children was segregation, education in a special class or special school. In 2021, the Methodological and Pedagogical Centre in Bratislava conducted an extensive survey focused on the contribution of helping professions in inclusive education

in schools. This survey, part of the national project *Helping professions in the education of children and students*, included 3,197 respondents. The results clearly demonstrated the necessity of school special educators (as part of school support teams) and teaching assistants in the education of children in kindergartens. The authors of the survey recommended improving the cooperation between teaching and professional staff with teaching assistants in diagnosing and stimulating children's development in preschool education, with an emphasis on children with health and social disadvantages (Juščáková et al., 2021). Šilonová and Klein (2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023) have long focused on the issue of inclusive education at the preschool level in Slovakia. They are conducting longitudinal research as a part of the national scientific projects VEGA, KEGA and national inclusive projects from 2015 to 2024. The aim of their research is to contribute to improving the quality of inclusive education, inclusive diagnostics, and evaluation of the level of inclusiveness of schools through school support teams. These teams, aligned with the concept of inclusive education, operate in kindergarten environments.

Research Issue

The research focused on the evaluation of the work of school support teams in kindergarten settings in the Slovak Republic. It aimed to identify the quality of processes in the creation of school support (inclusive) teams in kindergartens, in which school special educators or other categories of professional staff play a key role. In making the work of school support teams more effective, it is necessary to gain a more detailed insight into the work of its individual members. In kindergartens, these are primarily school special educators and teaching assistants. Insight into their work can be acquired through the views of the teaching staff in kindergartens who work closely with the members of this team. For this reason, the views of kindergarten teaching staff (kindergarten headmasters, teachers and teaching assistants) on inclusive education were researched with an emphasis on the views and attitudes towards the professions of school special educator and teaching assistant and their work in preschool education.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Based on the analysis of the theoretical background, field experience, and the formulated research problem, the research questions were stated:

1. What is the opinion of the teaching staff on the existence of a school support team in kindergarten in terms of its positive impact on the development and solution of various problems of the children?
2. What is the opinion of the teaching staff on the existence of a school support team in kindergarten in terms of positive impact on the work of teachers?
3. What is the importance of the activities in the work of a school special educator from the perspective of the teaching staff? Which activity is considered to be the most important?
4. What is the importance of the activities in the work of a teaching assistant from the perspective of the teaching staff? Which activity is considered to be the most important?

Research Methodology

General Description

This research is part of a national project entitled *Possibilities of Inclusive Education of Students with Special Educational Needs*. It is part of a longitudinal series of national research

projects previously conducted in Slovakia. These projects primarily focus on implementing inclusive measures in educational practice. The research specifically examined the educational trajectories of the children who were part of these studies. The ambition of the research findings is to contribute to the improvement of inclusive education, inclusive diagnostics, and the evaluation of the inclusiveness of schools through school support teams. In addition to this, the activities of these school support teams were also examined as they operated in mainstream school settings in accordance with current school legislation.

To research the views of kindergarten teaching staff on the work of the school support team, a mixed-methods research strategy was employed. Initially, a literature review was conducted. Based on this review, a questionnaire containing both closed and open items was constructed, and pilot tested. Data collection took place between May 2023 and August 2023 using the self-constructed questionnaire. The responses were evaluated, analysed and interpreted.

Sample

The population consisted of kindergarten headmasters, teachers, and teaching assistants working in kindergartens within Slovakia. According to the Centre for Scientific and Technical Information, there were a total of 17,811 kindergarten teachers and 292 teaching assistants in Slovakia in 2023. In calculating the sample, the measurement error was set at 5%, the confidence level at 95%, the size of the population at 18,103 and the response distribution at 50%. The calculated sample (minimum recommended size) is 377 respondents. The statistical sample consisted of 394 respondents from 142 kindergartens in the Slovak Republic, including kindergarten headmasters, teachers, and teaching assistants. The composition of the sample by gender and level of education corresponds to the typical proportions in the educational sector in Slovakia.

The highest proportion of respondents falls within the age range of 20 to 50 years (73.85%). A significant 53.55% of respondents reported having between 0 to 10 years of teaching experience. Regarding educational attainment 208 respondents (52.8%) among the teaching staff hold first, second, and third degrees. Table 1 presents the characteristics of the respondents, including gender, age, length of teaching experience, education, and their working positions.

Table 1
Characteristics of the Sample

Gender	N	%
Female	384	97.46
Male	10	2.54
Age	N	%
18 - 20 years	5	1.27
21 - 30 years	80	20.30
31 - 40 years	108	27.41
41 - 50 years	103	26.14
51 - 60 years	79	20.05
61 - 70 years	19	4.82
Length of experience in the education sector	N	%
0 - 10 years	211	53.55
11 - 20 years	66	16.75
21 - 30 years	42	10.66
31 - 40 years	56	14.21
41 - 50 years	19	4.82
Highest level of education attained	N	%
Completed secondary education	179	45.43
Bachelor's degree (Level 1 university degree)	123	31.22
Master's degree (Level 2 university degree)	81	20.56
Doctoral degree (Level 3 university degree)	4	1.02
Other (e.g., post-secondary education, primary education, ...)	7	1.78
Working position	N	%
Headmaster	65	16.50
Deputy headmaster	28	7.11
Teaching assistant	119	30.20
Teacher	176	44.67
Kindergarten management	1	0.25
Social pedagogue	1	0.25
Parental assistant	2	0.51
Other professional staff	2	0.51

Instruments and Procedures

A self-constructed questionnaire titled *'Evaluation of the Work of the Kindergarten Inclusion/Support Team'* was employed to research the perceptions of respondents regarding the kindergarten inclusion/support team. The questionnaire primarily aimed to describe phenomena and events, which posed challenges in analysing its reliability. Therefore, pilot testing was conducted to assess the quality of the items and propose necessary modifications. In this process, minimal adjustments were made and integrated into the final version of the questionnaire (see Appendix). The validity of the research instrument was confirmed through expert evaluation.

The questionnaire was administrated to kindergarten headmasters, teachers, and teaching assistants from May 2023 to August 2023. It consisted of five items, four of them employing multiple scales for assessment. Initially, respondents were asked to evaluate whether the presence of a school support team in the kindergarten positively impacted the development and resolution of various challenges encountered by children and teachers, respectively.

The respondents provided their answers using a scale ranging from *Strongly agree* - *Somewhat agree* - *Cannot accurately judge* - *Somewhat disagree* - *Disagree*. For items 3 and 4, respondents identified the most critical activities performed by the school special educator and the teaching assistant within the school support team. Additionally, the respondents had the opportunity to add activities not listed and rate their relative importance on a five-point scale: *Very necessary* - *Necessary* - *Moderately necessary* - *Not very necessary* - *Completely unnecessary*. In the fifth item, respondents were invited to share their opinions on the roles of school special educators and teaching assistants within the school support team.

The research with human participants was conducted in accordance with the general ethical standards. The respondents were informed that the questionnaire was anonymous, and the results of the survey were used only to evaluate the effectiveness of the work of inclusive/supportive teams in kindergartens.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics, encompassing absolute frequencies, relative frequencies, mean, standard deviation, median, and mode were used for data analysis. To ascertain statistically significant differences in the responses of the respondents, a Chi-square test was conducted. The data were analysed to address the research questions effectively.

In addition, a qualitative approach to data analysis was utilised to examine respondents' elaborations on the topic in the open-ended questionnaire item. The qualitative data underwent open coding and skeleton analytic narrative to extract meaningful insights.

Research Results

In the first item of the questionnaire, respondents provided feedback regarding the presence of a school support team in their respective schools and identified its members. They also shared their opinions on the positive impact of having a school support team (see Table 2).

Table 2
The Positive Impact of Having a School Support Team

Statement	For the development and solution of various children's issues	On the work of our teachers
Strongly agree (%)	68.3	59.9
Somewhat agree (%)	28.9	33.2
Cannot accurately judge (%)	2.5	4.3
Strongly disagree (%)	0.3	2
Disagree (%)	0	0.5
Average	4.65	4.50
Median	5	5
Mode/mode frequency	5 / 269	5 / 236
Standard deviation	0.54	0.72
Coefficient of variation (%)	11.65	16.03

A total of 97.20% of the respondents strongly or somewhat agreed that the presence of a school support team positively impacts on the development and resolution of various children's issues. Regarding the impact on teachers' work, 93.1% of respondents agreed, with 75.6% strongly agreeing and 17.5% somewhat agreeing. The Chi-square test was employed to assess

the statistical significance between affirmative and other responses. For the first statement, Chi-square value $\chi^2(1) = 226, p < .001$. For the second statement, Chi-square value $\chi^2(1) = 180.3, p < .001$. In both cases, a statistically significant difference was found between respondents who agreed with the statement and those who did not.

The survey also captures perspectives from all respondents' categories regarding the roles of school special educators or other professional staff members in their respective areas of expertise, as outlined in Table 3. Statistical analysis using the chi-square test determined significant differences across all statements. Significant variations were observed, ranging from the lowest Chi-square value $\chi^2(1) = 72, p < .001$ for the tenth statement in rank order, to the highest Chi-square value $\chi^2(1) = 185.5, p < .001$ for the second statement in rank order.

Table 3
The Work of a School Special Educator or Other Professional Staff Member

The most important activities in the work of a school special educator or other professional staff member from the perspective of the respondents	Very necessary %	Necessary %	Moderately necessary %	Not very necessary %	Completely unnecessary %	Average	Median	Mode	Standard deviation	Coefficient of variation (%)
1. Diagnosing and identifying the specific causes of children's problems according to diagnostic and stimulation programmes for 3- to 6-year-olds.	67.5	25.6	6.3	0.3	0.3	4.60	5	5	0.64	13.99
2. Stimulating children's development according to diagnostic and stimulation programmes for 3- to 6-year-olds.	64.5	29.2	5.1	1.0	0.3	4.57	5	5	0.66	14.52
3. Providing direct support for children in developing social relationships and resolving conflicts.	61.4	31.0	4.8	2.0	0.8	4.50	5	5	0.75	16.64
4. Offering direct assistance to children in the areas such as self-awareness, self-control, and overcoming the subjective consequences of their problems.	58.1	34.8	5.3	1.3	0.5	4.49	5	5	0.70	15.68
5. Guiding educators on strategies to improve the social environment in the classroom.	44.2	38.6	11.4	4.1	1.8	4.19	4	5	0.92	21.90
6. Providing expert advice to teachers on diagnosing and evaluating children.	48.0	36.8	10.7	3.0	1.5	4.27	4	5	0.88	20.65
7. Organising professional events for educators, including discussions and workshops.	39.6	42.6	12.2	3.3	2.3	4.14	4	4	0.92	22.11
8. Offering advice and consultation to parents of children.	58.1	32.2	7.1	1.8	0.8	4.45	5	5	0.77	17.24
9. Organising professional events for parents, such as discussions and lectures.	38.6	41.4	13.5	4.8	1.8	4.10	4	4	0.93	22.68
10. Conducting home visits.	45.9	33.0	16.0	2.8	2.3	4.18	4	5	0.95	22.83
11. Maintaining contact and communication with professional institutions to provide assistance to children and parents.	49.2	39.8	8.1	0.8	2.0	4.34	4	5	0.82	18.97
12. Handling specific administrative tasks and documentation.	42.6	40.9	11.7	2.3	2.5	4.19	4	5	0.91	21.75

Following the previous questionnaire item, a series of questions explored the respondents' subjective perceptions of the quality and necessity of the work conducted by teaching assistants. The findings are detailed in Table 4.

Statistical analysis using the Chi-square test was employed to evaluate the significance of the differences observed. Statistically significant differences were identified across all statements, with the lowest Chi-square = $\chi^2(1) = 9.95$, $p < .001$ for the eleventh statement in the sequence, and the highest Chi-square $\chi^2(1) = 261.8$, $p < .001$ for the first statement in the sequence.

Table 4
Work of Teaching Assistant

The most important activities of a teaching assistant as a member of the school support team perceived by the respondents	Very necessary %	Necessary %	Moderately necessary %	Not very necessary %	Completely unnecessary %	Average	Median	Mode	Standard deviation	Coefficient of variation (%)
1. Providing individual assistance to children during educational activities in kindergarten.	78.4	18.0	1.5	1.8	0.3	4.73	5	5	0.61	12.83
2. Offering one-on-one support to children during play activities and outings in the kindergarten.	64.0	29.7	4.1	2.3	0.0	4.55	5	5	0.68	15.00
3. Teaching social and hygiene habits.	74.1	20.1	3.3	2.3	0.3	4.65	5	5	0.68	14.58
4. Facilitating communication in the children's mother tongue (interpreting, explaining).	64.5	25.4	6.9	2.5	0.8	4.50	5	5	0.80	17.66
5. Visits families facing challenges.	59.6	29.9	7.6	2.5	0.3	4.46	5	5	0.77	17.14
6. Engaging children's parents in collaboration with the school.	54.8	36.0	6.9	1.3	1.0	4.42	5	5	0.76	17.23
7. Facilitating communication in minority languages (interpretation between parents and school).	58.9	27.7	8.6	4.1	0.8	4.40	5	5	0.87	19.68
8. Liaising with social service providers, community members, and local agencies.	52.5	36.3	8.4	2.3	0.5	4.38	5	5	0.78	17.72
9. Engaging with the broader community.	42.9	39.3	14.2	2.5	1.0	4.21	4	5	0.85	20.23
10. Assisting teachers in preparing for classes.	44.2	31.5	13.5	8.6	2.3	4.07	4	5	1.06	26.09
11. Aiding teachers with documentation tasks.	30.2	31.0	18.3	12.2	8.4	3.62	4	4	1.26	34.78
12. Supporting teachers in organising classroom activities.	43.9	32.7	15.0	6.1	2.3	4.10	4	5	1.02	24.77
13. Assisting the school special educator/professional staff in communicating with children in their mother tongue (interpreting, explaining).	57.1	29.7	9.1	2.8	1.3	4.39	5	5	0.86	19.63

Based on the research results, all categories of respondents overwhelmingly perceive the benefits of teaching assistants. The activities deemed very necessary include individual help to children during educational activities in kindergarten (96.4%), individual help to children during play activities and outings in kindergarten (93.7%), teaching social and hygiene habits (94.2%), ensuring communication in children's mother tongue (89.9%), visiting families facing challenges (89.5%), and involving children's parents in cooperation with the school (90.8%).

In addition to the aforementioned duties, kindergarten staff consider the following areas of a teaching assistant's work to be important and necessary. The majority of teaching assistants assist the school's special educator or professional staff in communicating with children in their mother tongue, e.g., interpreting, explaining (86.8%), ensuring communication in the minority language, e.g., interpreting between parents and the school (86.6%), communicating with social, community, and outreach workers in the region (88.8%), assisting the teacher in preparing for lessons (85.7%), maintaining documentation (61.2%), and organising classroom work (76.6%).

At the end of the questionnaire, respondents were given the option to provide anonymous feedback on issues related to the role of school special educators and teaching assistants. Respondents expressed their opinions on the need to employ teaching assistants, and special educators in kindergartens. They considered these professions to be important, helpful, and beneficial, believing they were essential components of an inclusive school. Respondents emphasised the necessity of these roles when working with children with special educational needs, children from other national minorities, or socially disadvantaged children. They highlighted the value of these professionals in facilitating communication between assistants of a given national minority and the parents of children, as well as in overcoming linguistic barriers. The feedback indicated that teaching assistants and special educators are crucial in kindergartens due to their ability to provide individual attention to children. Additionally, it was noted that teaching assistants should possess at least an additional qualification in education to foster a kind and empathetic attitude towards children and to demonstrate acceptance within the kindergarten setting.

Discussion

The promotion of inclusive education has been successfully addressed in many countries in Europe and around the world, as evidenced by numerous research studies cited in the Literature review section (Gladush, 2018, 2020; Kožárová, 2022b; Kubánová & Kontseková, 2015; Shoval & Sharir, 2019; Zhu et al., 2019). However, in Slovakia, this issue is relatively new, particularly concerning the establishment and functioning of school support teams for the purpose of inclusive education. For this reason, it was necessary to establish new knowledge and facts about the functioning of these teams. The research specifically focused on the work of school-based special educators and teaching assistants.

The research explored the views of the teaching staff on the existence of a school support team in kindergarten, particularly regarding its positive impact on the development and resolution of various problems of children. The findings indicate strong agreement among the teaching staff, with 97.2% of the respondents expressing their approval. The difference between the respondents who agreed and those who did not was found to be statistically significant.

The research also focused on the opinions of the teaching staff regarding the existence of a school support team in the kindergarten, particularly its positive impact on teachers' work. The results showed that the respondents were in agreement on this point as well, with 93.1% expressing approval. The difference between the respondents who agreed and those who did not was statistically significant.

The research focused on the most important activity in the work of a school special educator from the perspective of teaching staff. The results of the Chi-square test indicated

that the most crucial aspect of a school special educator's work is the stimulation of children's development according to diagnostic and stimulation programmes for children aged 3 to 6 years. Additionally, the research also explored the most important activity in the work of a teaching assistant from the perspective of teaching staff. The majority of the respondents (96.4%) agreed that individual help to children during the educational process in kindergarten is the most important activity for teaching assistants.

The research results are in accordance with the research by Karademir et al. (2017). Based on interviews with teachers regarding the impact of teaching assistants on educational quality, it was concluded that teaching assistants can indeed enhance the overall quality of education. Similarly, it has been confirmed by teaching staff that teaching assistants play a crucial role in kindergartens. Gezer and Aksoy (2019), in their research, also view the presence of teaching assistants positively in preschool classrooms. According to their findings, preschool teachers noted the absence of teaching assistants as a significant issue.

The opinions of teaching staff are shaped not only by their own teaching experiences but also by their educational background. Attitudes towards inclusive education often become entrenched early in teachers' training. For instance, Cabanova and Trnka (2021) found that students in faculties of education are often hesitant about envisioning themselves as future teachers of children with special educational needs, and these attitudes tend to persist despite their exposure to inclusive education concepts. Similarly, Rochovska et al. (2023) observed that teachers' attitudes towards inclusion were unaffected by their participation in inclusion-focused projects.

Conversely, Carvalho et al. (2024) examined Portuguese teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education and discovered generally positive sentiments, although this study did not exclusively focus on kindergarten teachers.

Conclusions and Implications

The research results highlight the view of teaching staff regarding the roles of school special educator and teaching assistant in fostering conditions for the implementation of inclusive education in Slovakian kindergartens. These teaching staff recognise the positive impact of having a school support team on children's development and problem-solving capabilities, as well as on the teachers' work.

Across all respondent categories (kindergarten headmasters, teachers, and teaching assistants), there is a strong consensus regarding the significant contribution of school special educators in stimulating children's development according to diagnostic and stimulation programmes tailored for children 3 to 6 years old.

All respondent categories overwhelmingly acknowledge the crucial role of teaching assistants (considered very necessary) in various areas: providing individual assistance to children during educational and play activities and outings in kindergarten, teaching social and hygiene habits, facilitating communication in children's mother tongue (interpreting, explaining), conducting visits to families facing challenges, engaging parents in collaboration with the school, and assisting teachers in organising classroom activities.

The findings contribute to the general assessment of inclusive education in kindergartens in Slovakia. From the perspective of kindergarten teaching staff, the research confirmed that the effective work of school support team members, especially school special educators and teaching assistants, is a necessary and enormously important determinant of inclusive education for preschool children.

The findings significantly contribute to the overall evaluation of inclusive education in Slovakian kindergartens. According to kindergarten teaching staff, the research confirms that the effective collaboration of school support team members, particularly school special

educators and teaching assistants, is a critical and highly valuable factor in promoting inclusive education for preschool children. The above findings could be further enriched by incorporating the perspectives of school special educators and teaching assistants themselves. It is crucial to ascertain how their views align with those of the teaching staff regarding the effectiveness of the support team's work. Moreover, it would be beneficial to gather insights from all stakeholders, including children and their parents. The implications for future quantitative research could be enhanced by conducting case studies that delve into the operations of school support teams in particular kindergartens.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors declare no competing interest.

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Length of experience in the education sector:

- | | |
|-----------------------|----------------|
| a) Without experience | c) 4 - 9 years |
| b) 1 - 3 years | d) 10 a years |
| e) Over 20 years | |

Highest level of education attained:

Study programme:

1. The presence of a school support team in the kindergarten has a positive impact on the development and resolution of various problems encountered by children. (Choose one option.)

- *Strongly agree*
- *Somewhat agree*
- *Cannot accurately judge*
- *Somewhat disagree*
- *Disagree*

2. The presence of a school support team in the kindergarten has a positive impact on the teacher's work. (Choose one option.)

- *Strongly agree*
- *Somewhat agree*
- *Cannot accurately judge*
- *Somewhat disagree*
- *Disagree*

3. What do you consider to be the most important aspect of the work of the school special educator as a member of the school support team? (Choose one option in each statement.)

a) Diagnosing and identifying the specific causes of children's problems according to diagnostic and stimulation programmes for 3- to 6-year-olds.

Very necessary – Necessary - Moderately necessary - Not very necessary - Completely unnecessary

b) Stimulating children's development according to diagnostic and stimulation programmes for 3- to 6-year-olds.

Very necessary – Necessary - Moderately necessary - Not very necessary - Completely unnecessary

c) Providing direct support for children in developing social relationships and resolving conflict.

Very necessary – Necessary - Moderately necessary - Not very necessary - Completely unnecessary

d) Offering direct assistance to children in the areas such as self-awareness, self-control, and overcoming the subjective consequences of their problem.

Very necessary – Necessary - Moderately necessary - Not very necessary - Completely unnecessary

e) Guiding educators on strategies to improve the social environment in the classroom.

Very necessary – Necessary - Moderately necessary - Not very necessary - Completely unnecessary

f) Providing expert advice to teachers on diagnosing and evaluating children.

Very necessary – Necessary - Moderately necessary - Not very necessary - Completely unnecessary

g) Organising professional events for educators, including discussions and workshops.

Very necessary – Necessary - Moderately necessary - Not very necessary - Completely unnecessary

h) Offering advice and consultation to parents of children.

Very necessary – Necessary - Moderately necessary - Not very necessary - Completely unnecessary

i) Organising professional events for parents, such as discussions and lectures.

Very necessary – Necessary - Moderately necessary - Not very necessary - Completely unnecessary

j) Conducting home visits.

Very necessary – Necessary - Moderately necessary - Not very necessary - Completely unnecessary

k) Maintaining contact and communication with professional institutions to provide assistance to children and parents.

Very necessary – Necessary - Moderately necessary - Not very necessary - Completely unnecessary

l) Handling specific administrative tasks and documentation.

Very necessary – Necessary - Moderately necessary - Not very necessary - Completely unnecessary

4. What do you consider to be the most important aspect of the work of the teaching assistant as a member of the school support team? (Choose one option in each statement.)

a) Providing individual assistance to children during educational activities in kindergarten.

Very necessary – Necessary - Moderately necessary - Not very necessary - Completely unnecessary

b) Offering one-on-one support to children during play activities and outings in the kindergarten.

Very necessary – Necessary - Moderately necessary - Not very necessary - Completely unnecessary

c) Teaching social and hygiene habits.

Very necessary – Necessary - Moderately necessary - Not very necessary - Completely unnecessary

d) Facilitating communication in the children's mother tongue (interpreting, explaining).

Very necessary – Necessary - Moderately necessary - Not very necessary - Completely unnecessary

e) Visits families facing challenges.

Very necessary – Necessary - Moderately necessary - Not very necessary - Completely unnecessary

f) Engaging children's parents in collaboration with the school.

Very necessary – Necessary - Moderately necessary - Not very necessary - Completely unnecessary

g) Facilitating communication in minority language (interpretation between parents and school).

Very necessary – Necessary - Moderately necessary - Not very necessary - Completely unnecessary

h) Liaising with social service providers, community members and local agencies.

Very necessary – Necessary - Moderately necessary - Not very necessary - Completely unnecessary

i) Engaging with the broader community.

Very necessary – Necessary - Moderately necessary - Not very necessary - Completely unnecessary

j) Assisting teachers in preparing for classes.

Very necessary – Necessary - Moderately necessary - Not very necessary - Completely unnecessary

k) Aiding teachers with documentation tasks.

Very necessary – Necessary - Moderately necessary - Not very necessary - Completely unnecessary

l) Supporting teachers in organising classroom activities.

Very necessary – Necessary - Moderately necessary - Not very necessary - Completely unnecessary

m) Assisting the school special educator/professional staff in communicating with children in their mother tongue (interpreting, explaining).

Very necessary – Necessary - Moderately necessary - Not very necessary - Completely unnecessary

5. If you need to express your opinion on the work of school special educators or teaching assistants, this is the place to do it.

Thank you.

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