

Reflection of emotionality in the context of special education. Students with autistic spectrum disorders in inclusive schools

Autor: Jana Jamrichová, Vanda Hájková

Abstract

Reflection of emotionality in the context of special education. Students with autistic spectrum disorders in inclusive schools. – Pupils and students with autism spectrum disorder face many challenges that make their integration as full participants in the class in mainstream schools difficult. One of them is their specific characteristics in the area of emotionality and the related shortcomings in social interaction. This paper focuses on emotional manifestations of children with autism spectrum disorder in correlation with inclusion; it also seeks supporting factors for “full inclusion” and for the success of these children not only in the school environment, but also in future life in society and their community.

Keywords: autism spectrum disorders, special educational needs, emotionality, inclusion, inclusive education, support measures

Klíčová slova: poruchy autistického spektra, speciální vzdělávací potřeby, emocionalita, inkluze, inkluzivní vzdělávání, podpůrná opatření

Inclusive School and Inclusion

Pupils and students with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) have several options of being included in the educational system. These include inclusion, i.e., attending a mainstream school and being in the class with neurotypical classmates, then separate classes for pupils with ASD or other disabilities set up within mainstream schools, and finally, separate special schools designed for pupils with special educational needs. The current trend in education policies of European countries is the model of inclusive education.

Generally, inclusion is defined as integration of students with special educational needs into ordinary school classes among classmates with typical development. The popularity of the idea of inclusion in education has grown since 1980. The World Conference in Salamanca in 1994, which focused on special educational needs, was a major milestone. Since then, inclusive education has been recognised by international organisations, such as the United Nations and its Human Rights Commissioner, national governments with their departments of education as well as educators and other professionals working with people with special educational needs. Inclusion can be viewed as the most fundamental expression of recognition of human rights, not only in people with autistic spectrum disorder.¹

¹ GINDI, Shahr. Educational placement of students with autism spectrum disorder and its relation to socioeconomic status, intelligence, and diagnosis. *International Journal of Developmental Disabilities* [online], 2020, vol. 66, n. 3, pp. 235–244.

The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education states that inclusive education, together with social inclusion in school collectives, are the most significant factors in shaping the ability of people with disabilities to fully integrate into society in future life. Although different definitions of inclusion exist, in the field of education it can be summarised as a situation in which students with disabilities are educated in the same environment as their intact peers. An inclusive society allows for participation of all its citizens without limitations and restrictions based on dissimilarities from the majority, which process starts exactly with inclusive schools accessible to everyone, schools welcoming and celebrating diversity.²

Article 24 of the United Nations Organization's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, adopted by the Czech Republic, emphasises the provision of inclusive educational system at all levels as well as lifelong learning that would develop the potential, personality, talents and creativity of persons with disabilities to the fullest possible extent in order to enable everyone to participate effectively in society with respect to human diversity. The Czech Republic has undertaken not to exclude persons with disabilities from free and compulsory primary education or secondary education precisely because of their disabilities. Such inclusive education is to be provided to pupils at their place of residence. It is also expected that based on their individual needs, pupils will be provided with support necessary for them to achieve the maximum possible progress in education and social inclusion.³

Emotionality in Pupils with Autistic Spectrum Disorder

The basic characteristics of autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) and their manifestations suggest that pupils with this diagnosis, although perhaps no two identical individuals can be found among them, have certain similarities – apart from other things – in the sphere of emotionality. Experiencing and demonstrating their own emotions as well as understanding other people's emotions is usually specific. In the area of social interaction, the children are thus confronted with the fact that they cannot adequately assess emotional situations and they lack sufficient response to other people's emotions. This is related to the fact that they have inadequate appreciation of social cues, as shown by lack of modulation of behaviour according to social context, and generally, their integration of communication, social and emotional behaviours is weak.⁴

Presence of ASD impairs mental development of the child mainly in the area of communication, social behaviour, imagination and symbolic thinking as well as sensory perception and thinking. The child is unable to evaluate information in the same way as neurotypical children; their perception, feelings and behaviour are different. Frequency of the symptoms and severity of the disorder varies with each child. Some of the skills in these areas may be missing altogether, while other skills are significantly delayed.⁵

² LÜDDECKENS, Johanna. Approaches to Inclusion and Social Participation in School for Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Conditions (ASC) – a Systematic Research Review. *Review Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* [online], 2021, vol. 8, n. 1, pp. 37–50.

³ UN CRPD (UNO Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities – Article 24 Education). Decree No. 27/ 2016 Coll. *Decree on educating pupils with special educational needs and talented pupils*.

⁴ International Classification of Diseases and Associated Health Problems (ICD-10).

⁵ THOROVÁ, Kateřina. *Poruchy autistického spektra* (Autistic Spectrum Disorders, extended and revised edition). Praha: Portál, 2016.

Pupils with ASD have serious deficits in the emotional area, which cause them difficulties in establishing and maintaining relationships with their classmates and complicate their self-concept. It is not easy for them to understand emotions of other people. Their level of empathy may be too low or too excessive, making objective assessment of a situation impossible. Their emotional reactivity is limited. They frequently suffer from affective instability and mood swings, they may overreact – from our point of view – to even minor stimuli, while sometimes they seem apathetic and passive. The stimuli they respond to may seem banal, for instance, only a small auditory stimulus may be responded to; however, they perceive it as very intense and unpleasant.

As it is difficult for them to express their feelings, both verbally and non-verbally, other people often perceive their statements and behaviours as inappropriate and incomprehensible or as expressed in inappropriate situations. We frequently see these pupils self-underestimating themselves or, on the contrary, looking for causes of their own mistakes in others, completely inconsistently with reality.⁶

Sometimes, due to their lack of emotional control, they go through sudden tantrums, attacks of aggression and outbursts of anger, or on the contrary, they feel desperate and hopeless, often because of an unforeseeable change they did not expect or when a ritual was not adhered to. The lacking development of communication capacity and social skills has major impact on such explosions of emotions.⁷

Students with PAS can suffer from extreme nervousness and anxiety from being examined and having to speak in front of the class, and they often suffer also from specific fears of common objects and situations (e.g., sneezing, walking on stairs, a red pencil), social phobia may also appear, and sometimes, they suffer from persistent anxiety from the surrounding environment, which further deepens their feeling different from their classmates. Their feelings can lead to panic reactions characterised by uncontrolled behaviours (e.g., screaming, crying, fleeing, defensive attacking, freezing, and failure to respond at all).⁸

In children with ASD, all these problems in the area of emotions often result in children with ASD being excluded from the class, being bullied, being unable to establish friendly relationships with their peers, and feeling very isolated. In order to achieve actual inclusion, it is necessary to be aware of these specific characteristics and be able to work with them in mainstream classes.

Gender-Related Specifics of Emotionality in Children with ASD

An intriguing research into gender differences in emotionality and sociability of children with high-functioning ASD has shown that emotions experienced and manifested in girls and boys with ASD differ significantly. As a general rule, the incidence is at least four men with ASD for every woman diagnosed with ASC, while it was believed that men and women were no different in terms of emotions. Girls included in the research achieved

⁶ ŽAMPACHOVÁ, Zuzana, ČADILOVÁ, Věra et al. *Katalog podpůrných opatření dílčí část pro žáky s potřebou podpory ve vzdělávání z důvodu poruchy autistického spektra nebo vybraných psychických onemocnění*. Olomouc: Palacký University Olomouc, 2015.

⁷ THOROVÁ, Kateřina, *op. cit.*

⁸ ŽAMPACHOVÁ, Zuzana, ČADILOVÁ, Věra, *op. cit.*

significantly higher results in interpersonal and emotional skills than boys with ASD; their results were comparable even to those of neurotypical boys (a research sample of children aged 10–16 years).

This is also confirmed by the finding that girls with ASD have a more developed capacity of copying, imitation and social skills than could be expected. As social deficits are one of the diagnostic criteria for ASD, it could then happen that thanks to their better social skills, many girls with ASD have not been diagnosed as such.⁹ This would suggest that there may be more girls with autistic spectrum disorder in mainstream schools than we have thought. This is another reasons that we need to create school environment that is open to all children with respect for their individual specifics.

Enhancing Inclusion of Pupils and Students with ASD

With a view to the dynamic development of inclusion, the number of students with ASD in mainstream schools in Western countries has increased significantly in recent decades. With awareness of this diagnosis and the number of autistic children enrolled in mainstream schools increasing, it appears necessary to consider whether schools adequately meet the needs of this population.

Our educational system has undergone a number of legislative changes to promote and develop inclusion. Measures have been adopted based on the need to provide adequate and individualised support, to create conditions and to use procedures to prevent and compensate for disadvantages in order to eliminate to the fullest possible extent those factors which cause inequality in the results achieved that cannot be influenced by the very child with ASD. Teachers must be provided with such professional, methodological and financial support that will make education of children with ASD in mainstream schools feasible. This should include adapting of education legislation, making a five-level system of support measures available, and providing and financing support for teachers through teacher assistants.¹⁰

Prior to the very beginning of school attendance, successful start of children with ASD can be supported by developing their ability to establish personal contact and certain capacity for cooperation and working behaviour. School environment is highly demanding as far adaptability, the ability to accept changes, is concerned. This is connected with certain degree of frustration tolerance and the ability to regulate extreme emotional reactions. Before children enter school, they should have at least partial ability for imitation and functional communication, even if this means using a picture exchange communication system. On the contrary, more pronounced manifestations of problem behaviour, such as self-harming, hyperactivity or aggressiveness, may make it difficult to start school attendance.¹¹

⁹ HEAD, Alexandra M., MCGILLIVRAY, Jane A., STOKES, Mark A. Gender differences in emotionality and sociability in children with autism spectrum disorders. *Molecular Autism* [online], 2014, vol. 5, n. 1, pp. 1–20.

¹⁰ National Plan for the Promotion of Equal Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities 2015–2020.

¹¹ BITTMANNOVÁ, Lenka, BITTMANN, Julius. *Podpora začlenění žáka s autismem do třídního kolektivu. Prevence šikany prostřednictvím besed se spolužáky, rodiči a pedagogy*. Prague: Pasparta Publishing, 2017.

Support Measures

Many different adjustments to support children with ASD from the perspective of special education can be made directly in the educational process. Classes can be generally shortened to allow the child to go home earlier, or some subjects can be omitted. Materials in certain subject(s) can be limited, curriculum can be adapted, classes can be structured and divided into working and reward parts (to encourage the child to work, they may have their own individual reward system), and assignments can be customised so that the child understands them better and is able to do them. Methods of testing may be adapted to the pupil's preferences; the pupils can be granted more time to perform or allowed to work in a free empty classroom to have peace for work and to avoid stressful situations as much as possible. Other support measure for pupils or students with PAS include using of compensatory aids, such as laptops and tablets.¹²

In order to avoid negative perceiving of these measures by and their arousing envy in their classmates, thereby increasing the probability of segregation of the pupil with ASD, it is highly recommendable to explain the situation to them, provided that the pupil with ASD or their parents do not object.

If the level of stress and emotional discomfort in a child with ASD increases in the class, the child should have a place reserved for them to be able to go to and relax. It is important to know the individual specific features of the child, e.g., sensory hypersensitivity to certain stimuli or to specific fears, as this will help explain and possibly prevent problem behaviours and potential exclusion from the collective. Also, ensuring predictability of activities and of the environment through structuring and visualisation will help the child cope better with the school's demands.

Teacher Assistants

Involving of teacher assistants must be carried out sensitively. If they are seen as an assistant assigned to the pupil with ASD to accompany them everywhere, to assist them with everything and to give them their full attention, we can hardly say that this is what the philosophy of full inclusion has meant to be.¹³ Therefore, it is important that the role of the teacher assistant is clearly defined and sufficiently communicated between the teacher assistant and the teacher of the class. A teacher assistant is not a personal assistant to a child with ASD and should not be considered one by anybody. "A teacher assistant assists another teacher in organising and implementing the teaching process and promotes the autonomy and active involvement of pupils in all the activities carried out at school in the course of education, including the provision of school services." (Decree No. 27/2016 Coll.)

We would like to point out the part of the Decree discussing the activities of teacher assistants that mentions supporting pupils to achieve the greatest possible degree of autonomy, helping pupils with ASD to adapt to the school environment, and helping them to communicate with their classmates. As an adult, the teacher assistant is certainly more socially efficient than a pupil with ASD, and thus, they should not overly attract the attention of the classmates, but they should – by providing the minimum necessary level of support –

¹² ŽAMPACHOVÁ, Zuzana, ČADILOVÁ, Věra, *op. cit.*

¹³ GINDI, Shahar, *op. cit.*

give attention to the child with ASD and encourage both the child and their classmates to socially interact whenever there is an opportunity to do so. The teacher assistant should only intervene in an “opened” situation if it is necessary, as children need to learn to communicate directly with one another.

Being autonomous does not mean lack of support, but rather the possibility to ask for the help that one needs. As far as autonomy is concerned, a student with ASD, parents and school staff should therefore benefit considerably from the lowest possible – while at the same time sufficient – support for students with ASD, enabling them to optimally perform and grow in their environment. This minimum possible support depends on each student and should be reviewed regularly after consulting with the very student.¹⁴

Teachers

Each teacher can play an important role in preventing anxiety among individuals with ASD in inclusive school environment. Although previous studies¹⁵ have indicated that support for teachers can increase academic competences and prevent problem behaviours in the class, the ways of supporting teachers for the sake of social welfare of children remains unclear. A teacher should monitor their own behaviour and emotional reactions to students with ASD. If their expectations are lower than those they have towards neurotypical classmates, the self-fulfilling prophecies about performance of students with ASD may occur.

Falkmer *et al.* have stressed the importance of teachers’ attitudes toward students with ASD in promoting their academic and social success. They concluded that the teacher’s personal interest in teaching students with ASD has been essential for the students’ educational achievements. The teacher’s motivation is an important factor that needs to be considered when planning a child’s successful placement in mainstream school.¹⁶

If teachers (and other professionals in schools) organise school activities to include what a student with ASD prefers and cares for, then such student involves more in such activities and also initiates more social interactions with their neurotypical classmates. This is also important because young people who are more involved in organised events at secondary school are significantly more likely to also involve more in unstructured social activities, such as leisure activities with friends and co-workers, after finishing secondary school.¹⁷

Peers

The use of various interventions based on social interaction directly between students with ASD and their peers has proved promising and beneficial. Results of the research show

¹⁴ AUBINEAU, Morgane, BLICHARSKA, Teresa. High-Functioning Autistic Students Speak About Their Experience of Inclusion in Mainstream Secondary Schools. *School Mental Health* [online], 2020, vol. 12, n. 3, pp. 537–555.

¹⁵ TENNANT, Jaclyn M., DEMARAY, Michelle K., MALECKI, Christine K., TERRY, Melissa N., CLARY, Michael, ELZINGA, Nathan. Students’ ratings of teacher support and academic and social-emotional well-being. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 2015, vol. 30, n. 4, pp. 494–512.

¹⁶ FALKMER, Marita, PARSONS, Richard, GRANLUND, Mats. Looking through the Same Eyes? Do Teachers’ Participation Ratings Match with Ratings of Students with Autism Spectrum Conditions in Mainstream Schools? *Autism research and treatment* [online], 2012.

¹⁷ LÜDDECKENS, Johanna, *op. cit.*

that involvement of peers in supporting students with ASD creates positive social climate in the class and provides opportunities to experience different social situations.¹⁸

Students with PAS attending mainstream schools consider being involved in intensive academic training and having a friend inside the school their most significant activating moments.¹⁹

Knowing Their Strengths and Needs

Given the variety of ways in which autism is manifested in people, support options should be implemented on a case-to-case basis, following a thorough, regular and individualised assessment of the student's strengths and needs. Interests are one of the key prerequisites for inclusion. Thus, it is essential that staff and parents take time to familiarise themselves with the student's hobbies, interests and strengths. Taking them into account and making use of them in practice and in training will increase the self-esteem and personal commitment of the very students with ASD.²⁰

Pertinently, inclusion should focus on different individual levels of competence, application of different teaching and learning styles and assessment approaches as well as appropriate adjustment of the school environment, equipment and activities. Each individual with ASD is different and this must be respected, while the differences need to be approached systemically, as for instance, simple restricting of choices of teaching activities does not equal inclusive practice.²¹ Accordingly, it is material that teachers plan including a pupil with ASD while being aware of all challenges that the pupils may face and that are rather systemic and go beyond the formal organisation of the teaching space.²²

Understanding One's Own Diagnosis

Deep insight and understanding of their own status allows students to develop adaptive management strategies, empower their position, create the ability to communicate their needs to people in charge, and become able to defend themselves. Ideally, the child should understand their condition as early as possible, with the support of their parents, school staff and professional carers.²³

Further, it is consequential to raise social awareness of the complex issues of persons with ASD, in particular in educators and other professionals that work with these students. This vulnerable community is threatened by reduced participation in social activities, which is also related to problems on emotional level.²⁴

¹⁸ WATKINS, Laci, O'REILLY, Mark, KUHN, Michelle, GEVARTER, Cindi, LANCIONI, Giulio E., SIGAFOOS, Jeff et al. A review of peer-mediated social interaction interventions for students with autism in inclusive settings. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* [online], 2015, vol. 45, n. 4, pp. 1070–1083.

¹⁹ AUBINEAU, Morgane, Blicharska, Teresa, *op. cit.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ LÜDDECKENS, Johanna, *op. cit.*

²² LAMB, Penny, FIRBANK, Dianna, ALDOUS, David. Capturing the world of physical education through the eyes of children with autism spectrum disorders. *Sport, Education and Society* [online], 2016, vol. 21, n. 5, pp. 698–722.

²³ AUBINEAU, Morgane, Blicharska, Teresa, *op. cit.*

²⁴ LÜDDECKENS, Johanna, *op. cit.*

Factors Complicating Inclusion of Pupils and Students with ASD. School Absence and Bullying

Students with PAS are more endangered by their frequent absence from school than other, neurotypical students. A study of 216 students for 20 days has shown 42.6 % of students with PAS were partially or fully absent from school compared to 7.1 % of neurotypical students.²⁵ This phenomenon may indicate emotional discomfort of students with ASD in class.

Another negative factor is the problem of bullying, which pupils and students with ASD are exposed to more frequently than their intact peers. This phenomenon may be related to the difficulties sometimes experienced by students with ASD in expressing their emotions regarding situations related to school environment.²⁶

Emotional Issues

There is evidence that particularly highly functional young people with autism are at a greater risk of suffering from anxiety and depression, as they become increasingly aware of their shortcomings in social skills.

Another factor is that at the second grade of school (years 6 to 9), the school environment becomes more complex, students move between classrooms during the day, alternating teachers and classmates, the frequency and length of unstructured leisure time – breaks – increases, and the environment is also noisier and less predictable than at the first grade (years 1 to 5); thus, they are exposed to day-to-day unpleasant overstress.

Although in highly functional students with PAS, intellectual abilities are average or even above average, many of them still fail to achieve the same results in school as their classmates. During their school and professional careers, we are seeing lower levels of academic success, leading to low levels of education and employment as well as lacking satisfaction with the quality of their lives.²⁷

Students with PAS attending mainstream schools are more exposed to the risk of mental health problems, which largely affects their ways of processing, experiencing and ultimately perceiving the world around them. Problems in social and emotional understanding faced by individuals with PAS, including reduced ability to embrace the perspectives of others (“theory of mind”), are connected with maladaptive processes of social association, such as the tendency to perceive other people’s behaviour as hostile. This phenomenon is associated with anxiety and depression. The desire for routine and predictability due to difficulties in understanding the outer world can also increase anxiety. Some previous studies have suggested that the sense of being different felt especially strongly by individuals with ASD without mental disability can also cause anxiety. Nervousness and anxiety causing

²⁵ MUNKHAGEN, Ellen Kathrine, GJEVIK, Elen, PRIPP, Are Hugo, SPONHEIM, Eili, DIESETH, Trond H. School refusal behaviour: are children and adolescents with autism spectrum disorder at a higher risk? *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders* [online], 2017, vol. 41–42, pp. 31–38.

²⁶ AUBINEAU, Morgane, Blicharska, Teresa, *op. cit.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

activities prevent students with PAS from participating in them as much as they would like to, thus again excluding them from the collective of classmates.²⁸

Managing sensory sensations, immature behaviour of their classmates towards them, and their fatigue from constant need to cope with problems in working and in the school environment are the most significant difficulties faced by students with ASD in school life. The challenges that they have to overcome prevent them from making good use of their studies. The reasons include difficulties in understanding and meeting social expectations on the part of teachers and peers and a greater risk of mental health problems.

Conclusion

Although school inclusion can be stressful and demanding for most parties involved, it has proved necessary and beneficial for the development of their social skills and demonstrating their full potential. Inclusion entails many risks for these young people, such as academic and school failure, low self-confidence, depression, and the threat of becoming a victim of bullying. Pupils and students with ASD are much more vulnerable in many aspects than other students.

Education systems are supposed to educate, qualify and socialise. Mere education does not suffice to prepare students for becoming grown up, competent and successful people. Clearly, there is a delicate balance between seeking the social skills necessary for autonomy and adult life and promoting their identity, so essential for their self-awareness and self-esteem.

Inclusion should be a dynamic process that would accompany a person with ASD throughout their life. Promoting awareness of the specific characteristics of persons with ASD is essential for all parties involved in order to provide students with ASD with access to the same opportunities in education, work and social life. It is necessary to respect the capacity of each individual as well as neurodiversity, as in people with ASD, heterogeneity is as common as in neurotypical people.

²⁸ LÜDDECKENS, Johanna, *op. cit.*

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(Mgr. Jana Jamrichová, DiS., a doctoral student of Special Education at the Faculty of Education, Charles University; Doc. PaedDr. Vanda Hájková, Ph.D., associate professor of the Department of the Special pedagogy at the Faculty of Education, Charles University.)