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QUALITY OF SPECIAL EDUCATION: PARENT PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Parent participation is one of the main quality indicators for education, including special education. Parent perspective can help to ensure quality improvement and reveal possible drawbacks of the education system. The study analyses 23 narratives of parents of children with SEN. The context of children educational biographies reflects parent evaluations on the quality of educational provisions, pedagogical staff competence in terms of taking care of children's wellbeing, physical and emotional security, and promoting educational achievements. The purpose of this study is to outline parent understanding of diverse quality education dimensions and their involvement in evaluating the quality of educational provisions for SEN. The research questions put forward:

- In evaluation of which quality dimensions of educational provisions do parents of children with SEN require support.
- What is the relationship between parent expectations of quality education and existing offer.

The participants of the study were recruited using a strategy of stratified sampling and a qualitative research method of narratives was selected. To analyse and interpret the findings, the quality evaluation model of educational institutions developed by Tietze (2008; 2014) was applied. The findings state that the parents recognize education as a particular value and are interested in the education of their children. They express the ability to evaluate professional competence and educational provisions, however, they lack understanding about the quality of outcomes. Educational institutions have to initiate communication and plan collaboration strategies, developing both constructive and emotionally positive contacts, in order to balance the expectations of parents with the existing situation.

Keywords: Parent expectations and participation, dimensions of quality education

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1. Introduction

The issue of quality education has been often activated in nowadays social life processes. Since the end of the 20th century, when the national education systems of several European countries, the USA and Australia started to apply the tests like PISA, TIMSS, IGLU, experts in education, politicians, employers as well as wider society have taken part in discussions of their results in relation with the quality issues of educational achievements.

In the context of this dispute special education has been considered as a segregated sphere, where the education theory and practice for children with special educational needs (abbreviated as SEN) has made its way from the psycho-medical paradigm, based on the assumption that deficits are located within individuals (Mitchell, 2010) towards development. It is difficult to change the patterns of thinking, therefore the process of enrichment or change of paradigms that place more emphasis on the environment is very slow.

The reason for segregation in this sphere could be exactly the specific character of target audience with special educational needs. In these cases, the developmental process of a child is characterized by individual features caused by the particular character of general development process and evoked by limited psychophysical resources that become apparent in insufficient social abilities for independent life. Consequently, the educational needs of children with SEN are considered to arise primarily from the problems attributable to disabilities that result in delayed acquisition of knowledge and skills (Mitchell, 2010; Speck, 2005). Naturally, in these cases it is ineffective to apply the method of generally adopted tests for clarifying the effectiveness of education process.

However, nowadays the process of education for children with SEN is associated with some challenges. One of them refers to educational provisions for children with severe disorders. In these cases the specific developmental potential has to be taken in consideration and a pedagogical activity has to be oriented towards harmonious personality development and inclusion into social environment of every single child. Often it is a long-lasting process and there is no possibility of using objective methods to evaluate its effectiveness. Other essential challenge is connected with inclusive education provisions that means promoting optimal development of every child by using the basis of individual resources in mainstream school environments (Theunissen & Schirbot, 2006). Consequently, such conditions cause a necessity of applying individualized evaluation system for education quality indicators.

In the education system of Latvia both tendencies mentioned above proceed almost simultaneously. Since the end of the past century children with severe and multifunctional developmental disorders have been provided with possibilities of acquiring special education

programmes in accordance with the requirements of the Education and the Children`s Rights Protection Law. Correspondingly the educational provisions for the group of children mentioned above have been widened during the past decade also in inclusive environments. Simultaneously these tendencies have activated discussions on advantages and disadvantages of special or inclusive education. Also, parents of children with SEN engage in active discourse on possibilities to provide for quality education through nongovernmental organizations (abbreviated as NGO). Parental involvement has a significant effect on educational achievements, therefore it is an opportunity that has to be used to evaluate the quality of educational provisions. However, parents and professionals do not always agree on what would be the best for the family and the child. Also, the concepts of parent participation and quality education can mean different things to different people (Parent Participation: Improving Services for Disabled Children, 2004). In order to enhance effective and meaningful parent participation, the voice of parents has to be taken into account, in order to ensure quality improvement and reveal possible drawbacks of the education system.

2. Problem Statement

Education influences and reflects the values of society, and therefore it is of great importance to recognize a set of common values that underpin the educational process at schools. This also refers to the process of providing education and support to children with SEN, meeting their needs in communication, as well as in physical, cognitive, social, emotional and adaptive development (Darrow, 2011; Everington, 2005).

In this context the knowledge, skills and commitment of teachers, as well as the quality of school leadership, appropriate curricula, inclusive teaching and learning resources, and quality environments have been recognised as essential determinants of quality education and the most important factors in achieving high quality educational outcomes (European Union, 2009; Unite for Quality Education, n.d.).

Developing, shaping and the delivery of education and services for children with SEN require collaboration among professionals and especially parents. Parent participation is one of the main quality indicators for special and inclusive education. It is also recognized that in the provision of education services „...parents` views have been sought retrospectively as part of evaluation of provision” (Parent Participation: Improving Services for Disabled Children, 2004, as cited in Wolfendale, 1998, p. 11).

Parents` role in educating and supporting their children and the quality of parenting is the most important factor in preparing children for a safe, healthy and productive future. Five different levels of parent involvement have been identified: 1) being informed, 2) taking part

in activities, 3) participating in dialogue and exchange of views, 4) taking part in decision-making, and 5) having responsibility to act (Mitchell, 2010; Parent/Carer Participation Strategy, 2010). Significance of such social interaction is determined by the factor that attitude of children with severe developmental disorders towards extended environments is dependent on acceptance of their subjective needs and developmental disorders, characteristics of communication, organization of interaction and evaluation of achievements within a family microsystem. Accordingly, family involvement in educational planning is a critical aspect to school success and parents should feel confident that their child's needs are being met and that they are part of a partnership to deliver better outcomes for their child (Improving Parental Confidence in the Special Educational Needs System, 2010).

Despite the importance of family participation in education, barriers exist that limit engagement in educational planning (Children & Chambers, 2005; Friend, Summers & Turnbull, 2009). In order to overcome obstacles, pedagogical staff has to take into account that care about children with SEN has to be considered as one of the most complicated life trials because of the particular psychological climate that develops in these families (Jetter, 2003). Typical problems have also been observed in performing social roles of children with SEN. Not always it is possible to fully develop such typical behavioural attributes of nowadays children like self-determination, autonomy and achievements. Moreover, the internal functioning problems of a microsystem are intensified by the direct dependence of collaboration with different social and health care institutions that are consequently connected with developmental problems of a child (Engelbert, 2000). Particularities of the child's development and influence of social environment provoke contradictions in the implementation of parents' social role. However, like all other parents they are socially obligated to take responsibility of, love their children and promote their optimal development. Accomplishment of these demands has often been hindered by feeling guilty and by the necessity to uncover the most intimate aspects of their family life in the process of communication with experts of different areas (Wachtel, 2007).

Taking into account this set of circumstances, effective collaboration between families of children with SEN and educational institutions has to be oriented towards the satisfaction with their involvement in making educational decisions, feeling about the Professional working with their child, who respects their culture, their opinions, and make them feel optimistic and hopeful about their child's future (DeFur, 2012; Lytle & Bordin, 2001; Rock, 2000; Summers et al., 2005).

Summarizing scientific findings, it has to be emphasized that family-centred practice has been defined using two primary facets. The first facet is the partnerships that are

developed between professionals and parents and culminate in empowering the family to make decisions for their child. The second facet specifies that family is a recipient of support for two reasons: a) it helps children grow and learn and b) families are influenced by their child's disability and are in need of support in their own rights (Friend, Summers, & Turnbull, 2009; Summers et al., 2005). There is a third facet added by the authors of this article – emphasizing the role of parents, acting as evaluators of the quality of educational provisions for their family and the child.

For this purpose, the evaluation model of quality education outlined by German scientist Tietze (2008; 2014) has been employed. Its structure sets apart several dimensions that depend on individual's mental state rather than normative requirements. One of these dimensions is *the quality of pedagogical staff competence* that contains beliefs of meaningful professional activity of pedagogues, developmental opportunities for a child and a necessary support for it.

Correspondingly the second dimension is the quality of the process – this context includes care for children, compliance of implemented educational approach with the child's individuality, providing a sense of physical and emotional safety, and support for the child's learning process, as well as ensuring educational environment and resources.

The third dimension – the quality of structure, unlike the others previously mentioned, refers to the normative requirements, which are not dependent on particular situation, but are stable over the time and determine the functioning conditions for educational institutions, for example, size of groups and classrooms, teacher education and work experience, normative requirements of premises and material resources.

3. Research Questions

In evaluation of which quality dimensions of educational provisions do parents of children with SEN require support.

What is the relationship between parent expectations of quality education and existing offer.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to outline parent understanding of diverse quality education dimensions and their involvement in evaluating the quality of educational provisions for SEN.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Participants

The study was performed in 2013, during annual summer camp organized by the NGO “Velku biedrība” and analyses 23 narratives of parents of children with SEN in the context of children educational biographies reflecting their evaluations on the quality of educational provisions for SEN, pedagogical staff competence in terms of taking care of children’s wellbeing, physical and emotional security, and promoting educational achievements. The parents involved in the study represent diverse regions of Latvia and they have children with severe developmental disorders of different age and educational levels, enrolled in preschool or school environments ranging from full time placement or mainstream education classrooms to self-contained classrooms or separate schools. They have diagnosis like autism spectrum disorders, severe movement and mental development disorders.

There were separated two groups of parents of children with SEN, who 1) attend special education institutions (n = 14) and 2) learn in inclusive environments (n = 9).

5.2. Research method and procedure

The ecosystem study was implemented in the social and cultural constructs of real life environments that characterize mutual interaction between the microsystems of educational institutions and families. The participants of the study were recruited using a strategy of stratified sampling and a qualitative research method of narratives was selected.

Undertaking the research process, parents were given general guidelines for the content of narratives, for example, to reflect on the family interaction with society, educational institutions and external support system. The “Velku biedrība” acted as observers, they fixed and anonymised the narratives, and negotiated with the parents on making the narratives available to public. The narratives reveal parent understanding and give evaluation of the aspects of special and inclusive educational provisions for the pupils with SEN. Moreover, the findings help to interpret experiences of families in the process of interaction between the family and educational institutions.

In order to analyse and interpret the data and derive meaning from parents` shared experiences, the authors of the study identified core categories based on the quality evaluation criteria for educational institutions described by W. Tietze (2008; 2014), which were complemented by the authors, including also the aspect of educational outcomes

evaluated from the perspective of parents. The data was coded by the authors and according to the narratives, the following categories were defined:

1. The quality of pedagogical staff competence;
2. The quality of the process and the outcomes;
3. The quality of structure.

In order to reveal the essence of the study context, the analysis of narratives contains some complementary criteria: a) characteristics of parents' expectations and hopes in connection with the quality of educational provisions for their children with SEN, and b) their engagement in achieving this quality.

6. Findings and Discussion

6.1. Findings

Conversely to the research tasks put forward, a direct evidence **about expectations and hopes of parents** in connection with the quality of educational provisions for their children with SEN has not been found in the narratives. There are some indirect hints that the quality of education is related to the competence of pedagogical personnel and quality provision for learning and learning environments. The parents share the belief that their children need learning environments and competent teachers with specialist skills, who pay sufficient attention to the development of social and life skills, as well as physical development (Bethere & Pavitola, 2014). However, the parents recognize education as a particular value and are really interested in the education of their children. In this context a viewpoint of some parents of pupils with SEN can be considered as a clear manifestation: *“Also children with severe functional disorders need society and, of course, an educational institution. Every child learns according with his or her abilities. There has to be found an appropriate educational institution. Children wish to live in a family and want to be equal members of society like others.”*

In some cases there is observable active **engagement of parents in provision of education opportunities** for their children with SEN. For example, some parents report on a situation, when they want their child to attend school, although a special school, and not to use opportunities for home learning: *„Although my child was already able to write letters and figures, read and speak two- to three-word sentences, the State Pedagogical Medical Commission made a decision that my child is not able to learn at school. In spite of being rejected by experts, I didn't give up.”* Also, the following situation of ensuring inclusive education gives food for thought: *“My nine years old son has a diagnosis of atypical autism. For two years prior to school he attended an institution of preschool education. The teacher*

of special education suggested us rather to find a possibility to learn in a comprehensive school together with other children than to choose a special school. I am a pedagogue, that's why I understand, that he is not able to acquire a general programme, and, moreover, how to deal with behavioural disorders and everything connected with that!"

The narratives of parents give proof of their involvement in the implementation of special education programmes. Comparatively greater activity in this area is manifested by the parents, whose children are educated in inclusive settings. In this context the following point of view is very typical: *"We are interested in what activities are going on at school, what is intended to be achieved and what our child is doing there. At home we work a lot with developmental games."*

Parents also express endeavours to develop interpersonal relationships within inclusive environments based on mutual acceptance: *"As a mother, I have to answer many questions asked by healthy children about my exceptional child, and I strongly believe that it is necessary to tell as it is - why some children are different. Healthy children do not object being together with exceptional children, if they are explained why others are different."*

Summarizing the data obtained during the research, the confirmation of the reflections of parents about improvement possibilities of education system can be found. The amount of statements in this connection is more diverse and reflects in the narratives of those parents, whose children attend special schools. The narratives reveal that *„...children with functional disorders need preschool institutions with respective specialists" .* In connection with school education it has been emphasized that: *"I wish the children with SEN had wider opportunities in the sphere of interest education both at school and after it, for example, music activities or movement therapy."* The parents express anxiety about the future of their children after obtaining school education: *„I have already been worried about my child – a young person's life after school. It still is a responsibility of parents. The opportunities offered by state and municipality seem extremely modest."*

However, some opinions make to think that parents express unreasonably high evaluation of their role in their child's education process, for example: *„I have understood that I, the mother, am the greatest expert of my child, since I am aware of and can explain what exactly my child wants. I have experienced that pedagogues have no sufficient experience and information on how to understand and work with my child"*.

Evaluating the **quality of pedagogical staff competence**, there is clearly visible balance between proportions of positive and negative statements. Comparatively typical for both groups of respondents is a cognition like: *"Now I have good relationships with the*

teacher, but the beginning was very hard and challenging, as I had to tell a lot and continuously what is about my child.”

The following reflection of the situation is characteristic for all of the respondents: *“I do not feel the sense of responsibility from the teacher side. I have to inquire all the time about what is happening in the classroom, what my child is doing, what he is learning. The teacher keeps silent as soon as I stop taking interest. I wish the teacher shared her observations with the parents and suggested something, gave advice and we worked together as a team.”*

Comparatively polar are the evaluations of respondents from both groups regarding to the collaboration with the leadership of special and mainstream schools. A few respondents have indicated: *“The school principal is always encouraging, responds quickly on wishes of parents and solves conflicts.”* However, there is a sufficient number of statements of negative character, especially in connection with the provision of special education, for example: *„In due time, almost a year prior to school attendance, I repeatedly went to school to talk with the teacher and school leadership about my desire to start a collaboration of some kind, as I would like my child to attend this school. The attitude I experienced from school was neither with rejection nor encouragement. It seemed like the school is waiting for a while that, maybe, all this somehow will pass away. All collaboration was constrained to my talking.”*

Majority of negative comments, especially among the parents, whose children learn into inclusive environments, have been devoted to the support personnel at schools. In this context comparatively typical are the statements like: *“Vain hopes that I will be invited to negotiate with the school psychologist. It seemed to me that the specialist could be interested in my point of view and support needed for my child – in keeping an eye on him during free time activities, training of socialization skills, for example, in the canteen. It did not happen. I tried to initiate the conversation by myself. I was very disappointed.”* Similar facts have been revealed by the following answers: *“Although I asked, also the school social pedagogue never approached my child.”* Or: *“The speech therapist was not able to devote as much time to my child as I wished. The main problem of my son’s speech was the lack of comprehension, and it had to be corrected by a special pedagogue.”*

In this context an indirect, but still negative statement is a suggestion that could be interpreted further, expressed by a mother of a special school child: *“I wish knowledge of pedagogues were deeper and educating children was the work from the bottom of their hearts, and personal characteristics and functional disorders of every child were taken into consideration.”*

Contradictory views of parents can be observed in evaluation of the **quality of the process and the outcomes** of educational provisions for children with SEN. Some parents involved in the study express full satisfaction with educational environment, resources and content that is in accordance with the child's individual needs. Correspondingly other respondents address negative criticism towards educational institutions of their children. In this context attention should be paid to the comparison of educational institutions of different type, for example: *"I was encouraged to go to the special school, to get acquainted with the pedagogues and life conditions there. I tried to find peace and trust in myself that sending my son away from home I could keep calm and secure that everything was fine with him. Now my son has graduated the fourth grade. I know that I have not made a mistake by choosing this option; there are pedagogues that can be trusted in and who try to work with children with autism. The teachers are able to teach patiently and wait for results, as well as enjoy about every tiniest achievement."* Similar idea is found in several narratives created by the parents, whose children are educated in inclusive settings. Very typical is another example like: *"Unfortunately it has to be concluded that school was not at all ready to educate children with autism spectrum disorders. Not only pedagogues! Also the infrastructure was not prepared for that. To my mind, such kind of attitude is inexcusable and careless regarding to children, who need programmes of special education."* In order to improve such educational settings, there is a suggestion expressed in several narratives: *"I did not like that there was only one special pedagogue in the classroom. Six children – and each with diverse diagnosis, all unable to talk. One teacher is not able to devote so much attention to every individual as needed, to my mind."*

Essentially different opinions are expressed by the parents of children attending special schools. Majority of them share positive opinion like *"...it is delightful that the child is in a society and socialize when at school"*. Hardly ever a positive evaluation has been expressed in connection with developmental indicators of children in inclusive environments. There are also some examples of negative criticism from the parents of children attending special schools that certify that *"the child seems to feel well in the institution of special education, but I think that they lack skills to work with him,"* or: *"My child has poorly developed language and literacy skills. I feel worried. Perhaps I have missed the developmental period of these skills? I feel disappointed with the pedagogue, who is not able to explain how these skills could be improved. Seeking for responses remains in the level of my comprehension."*

Negative criticism in this context appears in connection with educational outcomes in inclusive settings, for example: *"My boy started to attend a local elementary school, but we*

were asked to leave after the second grade. He is very active, therefore demands particular attention. But in regional school he was excluded and nobody taught him. Said that he was like zero. And it was like that – he did not recognize neither letters nor figures. He wasted two years there.” Another example certifies about the regress in development: “A progress was felt for two years. There were a few children in the class and a lot of individual work with my boy. Gradually my son started to know letters and figures. He learned a lot of other things. The speech therapist corrected his speech. But then something happened. Teachers changed, the number of children increased in the classroom and in school. My son did not like to go to school anymore. The school personnel complained about his unwillingness to learn, bad behaviour and being naughty.”

Summarising the data obtained during the study, it has to be emphasized that respondents comparatively little have turned their attention to the normative aspects of education process. Therefore, the **evaluation of the structure quality** is relatively limited. Representatives of both groups have indicated that the parents of children with severe developmental disorders have to deal with many formalities during the transition period between preschool and school education. The parents of children who learn in inclusive environments have turned greater attention to the normative requirements. Contradictions between children`s formal rights and real possibilities have been reflected in the narratives of a few respondents of this group, for example, “*There are special classes in comprehensive schools. It is written down very nicely, but life is different. What is the goal of forming these classes if we have always received only excuses from the board of education?*” Tendencies of correlation between the rights and possibilities are reflected in a typical statement expressed by parents: “*We have understood – before school starts, parents need to evaluate very carefully whether and how the school is able to implement a programme of special education.*”

6.2. Discussion

The findings from the empirical study have indicated that parents of children with SEN wish to be treated with respect and trust, as well as to experience meaningful and collaborative relationships. The findings are in concordance with the cognitions revealed in a range of reports regarding the quality of special educational provisions, like a) positive relationships between service users and providers are critical to successful parental involvement, b) families and children with SEN have to feel confident, included, and supported, as well as convinced by having opportunity to move from one to the next stage of their education, and c) it is crucial to have meaningful and open communication both

internally and externally (Parent/Carer Participation Strategy, 2010; The Quality Indicators for the Work of the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators, 2011).

However, according to the empirical data, the benefits of parental involvement are still undervalued by educators and school leadership that, in its turn, have an effect on the quality of educational provisions and outcomes. In accordance with the five levels of parent involvement outlined by Mitchel (2010), there is apparent activity in all levels, but each of them has relevant disadvantages that hinder quality education. Especially availability of information and being informed (1st level) is of great significance, since informed and involved parents, not simply passive receivers of information, are more likely to have realistic expectations of services and make informed and reasonable educational decisions on choices and priorities (Improving Parental Confidence in the Special Educational Needs System, 2010; Parent Participation: Improving Services for Disabled Children, 2004).

Parent involvement in activities, however, to a limited extent, participation in dialogue and decision-making (reflecting the 2nd, 3rd and 4th levels) to a great extent depends on mutual communication and applied collaborative approaches and strategies. For the present, parent initiative is still predominant and not always supported by professionals. Here emerge the double-sided character of the problem – parents and professionals, where a) parents are not fully aware of the educational needs of their child and therefore they lack specific expectations and hopes about potential outcomes of the education system, b) parents often have inadequate understanding of schools as socially regulated microsystems, which inner functioning differs from a family microsystem, and where their child with SEN can not be the only one in the focus of attention, and c) professionals, even with good professional knowledge and skills lack competence to engage in open communication and explain these problems.

Therefore, there has to be a strong emphasis on the vital role of leadership team - since the needs of children with severe disabilities are very specific, there has to be careful staff selection and its development strategy taking into consideration also their personality traits and values. It is of great significance to establish a school ethos that welcomes children with SEN and create a culture where parents are encouraged to engage with the school (Improving Parental Confidence in the Special Educational Needs System, 2010). It is evident that good participation and communication leads to “empowered parents, empowered children and empowered services. This is undoubtedly a win-win situation for disabled children, their families and the professionals who work with them” (Parent Participation: Improving Services for Disabled Children, 2004, 5). The authors strongly agree with the

belief that parents observations, experiences, knowledge and expertise is unique, and only through working with parents it can be clear how to deliver the services they need.

The data give evidence that parents feel responsibility to act (5th level), but they do not know the formal requirements that characterize **the quality of structure** in education system. In other words, they do not know their rights and consequently are not able to evaluate this sphere and make informed educational decisions. Therefore, their evaluation has been formulated looking through the prism of the needs of every single child. The authors of the article strongly believe that education policy makers have to ensure scientifically proven and research based evaluation of special education institutions and inclusive environments, as well as to promote good practice exchange.

7. Conclusions

The findings have clearly stated that:

1. Partnerships with parents of children with SEN have to be seen as an essential component of quality education for pupils with SEN. Therefore, special and inclusive educational institutions should initiate constructive and emotionally positive communication, plan collaboration strategies and develop a school culture for pupils with SEN, in order to balance the expectations of parents with the existing situation. Effectiveness of parent participation strategies would promote their child's learning outcomes and contribute to the development of individual learning.
2. Families of children with a statement of SEN often face a challenging set of circumstances that demand a particular support in terms of the form and content of communication. The strategies of special and inclusive educational institutions and their culture should be oriented towards a) availability of information about the potential of the child's development, educational needs and the existing offer in this sphere in the form that is understandable for parents, and b) ensuring possibilities to be involved in the decision-making processes on equal terms.
3. In order to balance parent expectations in accordance with the needs of their children, there is a demand in: a) developing parents' understanding of the educational institution as a complex microsystem rather than concentrating only on their own child's special educational needs, and b) recognising the principle of empowering parents and strengthening their voice in making informed and reasonable decisions about their children's wellbeing and suitability of educational provisions.

It is intended that the results of the study will be used to improve a) parental involvement by implementing the best practice in provision of information, participation and feedback, and b) tools for developing meaningful communication and partnerships between schools, parents and professionals.

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