

DELIVERING DIRECT SUPPORT IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: SCHOOL SPECIAL EDUCATORS' PRACTICE PATTERNS IN CZECH MAINSTREAM SCHOOLS

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Abstract

While school special educators have been legislatively established in the Czech Republic for many years, no research has systematically examined their practice patterns. This mixed-methods study surveyed 439 school special educators, combining structured questions with open-ended responses analysed using descriptive and inductive thematic analysis. School special educators predominantly work with students with specific learning disabilities (96.4%), speech and language impairments (60.1%), and behaviours that challenge others (49.2%). Three-quarters regularly support students from non-Czech language backgrounds and those experiencing social disadvantage, indicating their role extends beyond traditional disability categories. Individual special educational support constitutes their core function, with 88.6% providing weekly direct services through a systematised model characterised by small-scale provision (one-on-one or maximum four students), flexible scheduling (during or after class), and differentiated content based on student needs. These findings challenge international trends toward consultative models, demonstrating that direct support can be systematically integrated into mainstream education while maintaining collaborative practice. Results indicate the considerable importance of school special educators in Czech inclusive education with implications for professional training and policy development.

Keywords: special educational needs, school special educators, inclusive education, direct support delivery, mainstream schools

INTRODUCTION

Over the last three decades, the paradigm of inclusive education has represented both an appropriate pathway and a model associated with numerous specific educational challenges for many countries around the world. According to UNESCO (2017, p. 12), the central message of inclusive education “*is simple: every learner matters and matters equally*”. The right to inclusive education is internationally declared by article 24 of the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (United Nations, 2006).

Among the practical tools to ensure this right to inclusive education, many countries assign a key position to learning support staff, such as special educators, special education needs (SEN) coordinators, and learning support teachers, who provide learning support to students and guidance for their teachers in mainstream and special schools (Dobson, 2020; Fitzgerald & Radford 2022; Smith, 2020).

However, whilst the position of school special educators has been legislatively established in the Czech Republic for many years with defined parameters, no empirical research has yet examined which student populations receive their primary attention or how direct special educational support is systematically delivered in practice.

The authors are aware of the controversial nature of the term “special educational needs”, which is considered ableist and condescending by people with disability themselves (PWDA, 2021). However, it is the official

terminology in the Czech Republic, with a specific meaning, as it encompasses not only students with disability but also students whose educational support needs arise from social disadvantage. Therefore, the authors decided to use the term "special educational needs".

THE ROLE OF LEARNING SUPPORT STAFF IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

Learning support staff have become an important part of education staff in mainstream schools across many different countries over the past decades. The terminology used for learning support staff is diverse globally, sometimes referring to similar roles, such is the case of learning support teachers, school special educators, and special education needs coordinators. As well as the variety of their naming, the job descriptions of these professionals can vary from school to school within different education systems (Klang et al., 2017).

Within school counselling, the most well-known designation is probably SENCO - Special Educational Needs Coordinator. These members of school support teams are responsible for agendas related to supporting students with special educational needs. The core of their work is coordinating activities within the school; their workloads include identifying students with special educational needs, promoting collaboration within the school, seeking external resources, supporting teachers' professional development and working with external agencies (Colum & Mac Ruairc, 2023). SENCOs' work with teachers and their ability to positively influence a teacher's approach to a student with special educational needs is essential (Gäreskog & Lindqvist, 2020). In the area of individual student support, some studies place 'moral obligation towards students with special educational needs as a key characteristic of the SENCO profession (Udd & Berndtsson, 2023). SENCOs also play an important role in the methodological guidance of teacher assistants (Gerschel, 2005).

In schools, special education experts can play a leading role on the road to inclusion (Sirkko et al., 2024). However, defining the boundaries of SENCOs' work as change agents associated with inclusive education also presents a complex phenomenon given the great diversity of interpretations associated with the very perception of inclusion in education (Udd, 2024).

Existing educational research often highlights the importance of good collaborative settings between SENCOs and teachers or other school staff (Paulsrud & Nilholm, 2023; Struyve et al., 2018). Less frequently highlighted in research is the role of SENCOs in directly supporting students with special educational needs, which is specifically relevant for example for students with behaviours challenging others (Nye et al., 2016).

Research also demonstrates that to be truly effective, SENCOs need to have a higher level of specialism (Miyaki, 2019) as well as support from local education authorities (Cowne, 2005). Lack of support, coupled with increasing bureaucracy and increasingly demanding performance requirements, may lead to higher turnover in the SENCOs profession (Curran & Boddison, 2021).

SCHOOL SPECIAL EDUCATORS AND PROVISION OF LEARNING SUPPORT TO STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

In the Czech Republic, the concept of inclusive education has only been developed since the beginning of the twenty-first century (Zilcher & Svoboda, 2019). The position of school special educators – who support students with "special educational needs" (i.e., students with disability and students whose learning support needs arise from social disadvantage) in mainstream schools – was enacted in 2005 with the adoption of a new Decree on the Provision of Counselling Services in Education (Czech Republic, 2005). According to this decree, school special educators should provide consultation and methodological guidance for teachers and parents as well as direct support for students with "special educational needs".

Under the Teaching Personnel Act (Czech Republic, 2004a), as amended, school special educators are required to have a university degree in special education or a university degree in another teaching subject supplemented by a qualifying course in special education.

As the concept of inclusive education has expanded in the Czech Republic, particularly since 2016, the number of school special educators in mainstream schools has been growing. As Table 1 shows, the number of school special educators has increased by tens of percentages over the last few years, from 1,125 in 2018 to 1,958 in

2023 (MEYS, online, 2024-08-02). And although many work only part-time, these professionals represent an increasingly important part of learning support teams in the Czech Republic's education system.

Table 1 Numbers of school special educators in mainstream schools in the Czech Republic

Year	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Number of workers	1,125	1,260	1,453	1,516	1,642	1,958	2,199
Full-time equivalents	658.0	709.1	829.3	877.4	951.3	1,135.8	1,280.2

(MEYS, online, 2024-08-02)

Support for students with special educational needs in the Czech Republic is based primarily on § 16 of the Education Act (Czech Republic, 2004b), which, after being amended in 2016, introduced a system of so-called "support measures". One of these specific support measures is the provision of special educational support, which takes place either individually or in small groups of up to 4 students, usually under the guidance of the school special educator. According to the decree on the education of students with special educational needs (Czech Republic, 2016), the main goal here is to provide students with special educational needs with specific professional support in those educational areas that are most affected by their disability.

Although the profession of school special educators has been legislatively established in the Czech Republic for many years and the provision of individual special educational support represents a core professional activity, no empirical research has systematically examined two fundamental questions: which students with special educational needs constitute their primary caseloads, and how individual special educational support is delivered in practice. This represents a significant gap in understanding a well-established professional role within the Czech inclusive education system.

The presented study addresses this specific gap in Czech educational research by providing the first large-scale empirical evidence about school special educators' practice patterns. It makes two key contributions to understanding inclusive education support delivery: first, systematic documentation of which student populations receive intensive support from school special educators in mainstream Czech schools; and second, detailed analysis of how individual special educational support is implemented in practice. While existing international literature focuses primarily on consultative aspects of support (Paulsrud & Nilholm, 2023; Struyve et al., 2018), this study reveals how direct support can be systematically integrated into mainstream education within the Czech legislative framework.

In terms of the work of school special educators and the provision of individual special educational support, this study aimed to answer these research questions:

- 1) Which students do school special educators most engage with in their work?
- 2) How important is providing individual special educational support?
- 3) How is individual special educational support implemented by school special educators?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research design

This study received an ethics approval from the [name of the university will be added following blind review]. The mixed-methods design was specifically chosen to address the study's dual research objectives. The quantitative component used structured questions to systematically document which students with special educational needs school special educators work with and which student populations receive their most intensive support. The qualitative component employed open-ended question to examine how individual special educational support is delivered in practice, allowing participants to describe processes and approaches in their own words. This combination enabled both systematic mapping of practice patterns and detailed understanding of implementation processes.

Survey

The survey instrument was developed through a collaborative process involving the research team's expertise in special education and inclusive education practices. The development followed established survey design principles (Fowler, 2014) and was based on systematic analysis of Czech legislation defining the role of school special educators and available research in the field. This legislative analysis ensured that survey questions aligned with official professional requirements whilst exploring previously unexamined aspects of practice. The final survey consisted of 14 structured questions organized into four main sections (see Table 2).

Table 2 Survey structure and content

Survey sections (number of questions)	Details
Professional Background and Qualifications (Questions 1-3)	Years of experience as a school special educator Educational qualifications and pathway to qualification Employment status (full-time equivalent)
Student Populations and Frequency of Support (Questions 4-5)	Frequency of work with 12 different categories of students (using a 4-point scale: often, occasionally, rarely, never) Identification of primary student population receiving most intensive support
Professional Activities and Practices (Questions 6-8)	Frequency of 20 different professional activities using the same 4-point scale Additional professional activities not captured in the structured list Time commitment beyond contracted hours
Direct Special Educational Support (Questions 9-11)	Implementation processes and organizational forms Coordination of methodological meetings with teaching assistants Evaluation of collaboration with external counselling services
Open ended questions (Questions 12-14)	Additional professional activities The process and content of individual special educational support Professional challenges and sources of satisfaction

Most survey items utilised a consistent 4-point Likert-type scale that operationalized frequency in concrete, time-based terms. The scale anchors were defined as "often" (at least once per week), "occasionally" (approximately once or twice per month), "rarely" (at least twice or three times per year), and "never" (less than twice per year). This operationalization was deliberately chosen to capture meaningful differences in professional practice while avoiding neutral response options that might reduce discriminant validity and encourage fence-sitting responses.

The survey also incorporated three open-ended questions that allowed participants to provide rich, contextual information in their own words. These questions invited respondents to describe additional professional activities not captured in the predetermined categories, detail the specific processes and content involved in providing individual special educational support, and reflect on both the professional challenges they encountered and the sources of satisfaction in their work. These qualitative components were essential for providing depth and nuance to complement the quantitative data, particularly given the exploratory nature of research in this relatively understudied professional domain.

Data collection

Data collection was conducted via an online survey platform. Publicly available email addresses of 1,268 school special educators working in mainstream elementary schools were identified through systematic searches of school websites. These professionals were contacted directly via email with information about the study and an invitation to participate. Of the 1,268 educators contacted, 439 completed the survey, yielding a response rate

of 34.6%. Most participants (76%) completed the survey within 30 minutes, while 11% required 30-60 minutes, and fewer than 2% needed more than one hour.

Data analysis

Responses to the 4-point Likert-type scale items underwent descriptive statistical analysis to identify school special educators' professional roles and determine which student populations receive the most intensive support.

The responses to the open-ended questions were analysed using inductive thematic analysis at the theme level (Hendl, 2023; Švaříček et al., 2014). Three different researchers from the team worked independently on the data analysis, systematically identifying themes emerging from participants' descriptions of support delivery processes. Emerging themes and categories were discussed by the entire research team at each phase of analysis, with discrepancies resolved through discussion until consensus was reached. This collaborative approach ensured comprehensive identification of key themes whilst maintaining analytical rigour.

In addition to the analyses described above, we constructed an exploratory index to capture the breadth of the student clientele. For each respondent, we counted how many of the twelve student categories (e.g. students with specific learning disabilities; behaviours that challenge others; speech and language impairments; intellectual disability; on the autism spectrum; with sensory or physical disabilities; chronic illness, students from non-Czech language background; with social disadvantage; and gifted pupils) they reported working with "often" or "sometimes" (response options 1 and 2 on the four-point frequency scale). This index ranged from 0 to 12, with higher scores indicating a broader clientele. We then examined whether the breadth of clientele differed by length of experience as a school special educator and contract size (FTE) using Kruskal–Wallis tests with five experience and five contract-size groups.

Participants

Although the position of school special educators is still relatively new in the educational system of the Czech Republic, most of the 439 research respondents already had quite long experience at the time of the survey – only about a fifth of respondents (n=95) had less than two years of experience as a school special educator, just under a third of respondents had experience between two and five years (n=128), a comparable number of research participants had experience between five and ten years (n=122), and about a fifth of respondents (n=94) had worked as a school special educator for more than ten years.

The majority of respondents, more than 80% (n=363), qualified as school special educators by earning a Master's degree in special education. Respondents who had only a Bachelor's degree in special education (n=14) or had other pedagogical education supplemented by a qualification course focused on special education (n=52) were represented in significantly smaller numbers. Respondents who had a doctoral degree in special education (n=4) or, conversely, workers who did not have a recognizable qualification and were working in the position as unqualified (n=6) participated in the research in minimal numbers.

RESULTS

School special educators' focus on individual groups of students

The findings show that school special educators spend most time supporting students with specific learning disabilities (i.e., dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia). As Table 3 shows, over 96 % of school special educators are regularly and frequently involved with these students. Other groups of students who are most often supported by school special educators include students with speech and language impairments, students with behaviours that challenge other, students on the autism spectrum and students with intellectual disability. Moreover, school special educators also work with students from non-Czech language background and students with social disadvantages – around three-quarters of respondents stated they work with these groups of students either weekly or at least once or twice a month.

Table 3 School special educators' work with different categories of students with special educational needs

Directions: "For each category of students, please indicate how often in your practice (as a school special educator, on average during the last year) you have worked with a student or students in that category."				
Categories of students	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
Student with specific learning disability	423 (96,4%)	11 (2,5%)	5 (1,1%)	0 (0%)
Student with behaviours that challenges others	216 (49,2%)	126 (28,7%)	77 (17,5%)	20 (4,6%)
Student with speech and language impairment	264 (60,1%)	104 (23,7%)	50 (11,4%)	21 (4,8%)
Student with intellectual disability	124 (28,2%)	84 (19,1%)	112 (25,5%)	119 (27,1%)
Student on the autism spectrum	116 (26,4%)	113 (25,7%)	121 (27,6%)	89 (20,3%)
Student with hearing impairment	49 (11,2%)	47 (10,7%)	106 (24,1%)	237 (54,0%)
Student with visual impairment	25 (5,7%)	41 (9,3%)	112 (25,5%)	261 (59,5%)
Student with physical disability	28 (6,4%)	44 (10,0%)	118 (26,9%)	249 (56,7%)
Student with chronic illness	42 (9,6%)	71 (16,2%)	155 (35,3%)	171 (39,0%)
Student from non-Czech language background	248 (56,5%)	87 (19,8%)	60 (13,7%)	44 (10,0%)
Student with social disadvantage	213 (48,5%)	107 (24,4%)	65 (14,8%)	54 (12,3%)

Note – Operationalization of terms used: frequently = at least once a week, occasionally = about once or twice a month, rarely = at least twice or three times a year, never = less than twice a year.

However, frequency of contact does not necessarily equate to intensity of support – a school special educator might work with a student regularly but provide only brief interventions. To better understand where educators invest most of their time and effort, we also asked respondents to identify students they support most intensively in their practice. These findings again highlight the prominence of students with specific learning difficulties, with over half of school special educators dedicating the majority of their time to this group. Approximately one-tenth of educators focus most intensively on students with behaviours that challenge others, whilst a similar proportion concentrate primarily on students with speech and language impairments (see Table 4).

Table 4 The "main clients" with special educational needs in special educators' work

Question: 'If you think of the student you have been working with most intensively/most often in your practice recently - which student is it?'		
Categories of students	Responses	Share
Student with specific learning disabilities	244	55,6 %
Student behaviours that challenges others	44	10,0 %
Student with speech and language impairment	43	9,8 %
Student with intellectual disability	27	6,2 %

Student on the autism spectrum	19	4,3 %
Student with hearing impairment	8	1,8 %
Student with visual impairment	2	0,5 %
Student with physical disability	1	0,2 %
Student with chronic illness	0	0,0 %
Student from non-Czech language background	20	4,6 %
Student with social disadvantage	21	4,8 %

Frequency of provision of individual special educational support

In terms of the individual activities included in school special educators' job descriptions, research has shown that it is providing individual special educational support that is the most common form of realized support. Over 88 % of school special educators reported that they provide individual special educational support frequently – at least once a week. On the other hand, only less than 5 % of research participants said that they never provide this form of support (see Table 5).

Table 5 Individual special educational support in school special educators' work

Directions: „For the following activity, please indicate how often you engage in the activity.“				
Activity	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
Providing individual special educational support	389 (88,6 %)	17 (3,9 %)	12 (2,7 %)	21 (4,8 %)

Note – Operationalization of terms used: frequently = at least once a week, occasionally = about once or twice a month, rarely = at least twice or three times a year, never = less than twice a year.

In comparison, the second most frequent activity reported by school special educators were consultations with teachers, which were frequently undertaken by 82% of participants, followed by consultations with teacher assistants, which were frequently realized by 75% of participants, and communication with other members of learning support team, which was frequently undertaken by 74% of participants.

Interestingly, for three of the most frequently supported groups of students with special educational needs, school special educators reported almost the same high frequency of providing individual special educational support – frequent providing of this support was reported by almost 90% of school special educators, who most often work with students with specific learning disabilities, 93% of school special educators working primarily with students with speech and language disorders and almost 95% of school special educators working primarily with students with autism spectrum disorders (see Table 6).

Table 6 Provision of individual special educational support and the most frequent groups of students with special educational needs

The special educational needs of the student with whom school special educator works most frequently	How often do you provide individual special educational support?			
	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
Students with specific learning disability	219 (89,8%)	7 (2,9%)	6 (2,5%)	12 (4,9%)

Students with behaviours that challenge others	35 (79,5%)	4 (9,1%)	1 (2,3%)	4 (9,1%)
Students with speech and language impairments	40 (93,0%)	1 (2,3%)	0 (0%)	2 (4,7%)
Students with intellectual disability	23 (85,2%)	2 (7,4%)	1 (3,7%)	1 (3,7%)
Students on the autism spectrum	18 (94,7%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (5,3%)
Student with hearing impairment	8 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Student with visual impairment	2 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Student with physical disability	1 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Student with chronic illness	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Student from non-Czech language background	19 (95%)	0 (0%)	1 (5%)	0 (0%)
Student with social disadvantage	15 (71,4%)	2 (9,5%)	3 (14,3%)	1 (4,8%)

Note – Operationalization of terms used: frequently = at least once a week, occasionally = about once or twice a month, rarely = at least twice or three times a year, never = less than twice a year.

Forms and content of individual special educational support

The participants were asked to share in their own words how individual special educational support takes place in their practice. Many of the responses referred to similar or identical content and forms, but at the same time, it should be emphasized that many participants also pointed out that the content and forms of special educational care varied greatly depending on the actual needs of the students. For example, Marie stated:

„It cannot be generalized. Special educational support is different for a student with a hearing impairment, a student with a specific learning disability, speech impairment or mild intellectual disability. It is tailored to the abilities of the individual student and sometimes – especially for children with ADHD and ASD – to their current mood.“

All participants stated that individual special educational support is conducted either one-on-one or in small groups with a maximum of four students¹. As Jana stated:

"I work with students in small groups, with a maximum of four students, or individually. Groups are put together in collaboration with the class teacher and in consultation with parents according to the type of difficulties of the students, so that all children benefit from participation in the group. I work individually with children with the most challenging difficulties who cannot manage to work in a group, for example because of attention deficit disorders or intellectual disabilities."

In terms of formal settings, participants described two possible forms of implementing individual special educational support, during or after morning classes. When the support takes place during morning classes, a student does not participate in a lesson with their classmates but leaves the classroom for independent implementation of the individual special educational support. School special educators most commonly use 'available hours'² for this format. For example, Alena stated:

¹ The maximum of four students per group is also defined by the Decree on the Education of Students with Special Educational Needs (Czech Republic, 2016).

² In the state-defined curriculum in the Czech Republic, elementary schools have the majority of lessons compulsorily linked to the teaching of a particular subject. In addition, however, the curriculum allows each school to include a few "available hours" in the timetable, these hours the school can devote to "extra" teaching in any subject of its choice.

"From the available hours, I take students who are recommended to attend individual special educational support. And I dedicate a whole one hour to them. I try to fit in some relaxing or not so challenging activities into the lesson."

The advantage of providing support during morning classes is that students do not have to participate in individual work at times outside of school teaching hours; the disadvantage is that they miss parallel standard classes.

The advantage of providing support after morning classes is that students do not miss their regular classes. The disadvantage is the increased workload after students' regular learning time.

In some schools, school special educators combine both two forms, for example by delivering individual special educational support for younger students during the morning, while taking older students for individual work in the afternoon. As Eva stated:

"For students in grades 1 to 5, it is implemented in the morning, usually instead of Czech language classes. Students in grades 6 to 9 participate in the support in the afternoon or in the morning before school. The content of support is based on the recommendations of the individual student's assessment report - it is individualised according to the student's needs, but always includes group activities."

As part of the organisation of individual special educational support, school special educators pointed to the key importance of cooperation with teachers, teacher assistants and parents or guardians. Martin suggested how such cooperation may look like:

"...we try to work closely with subject teachers, we plan classroom visits, visits of teachers or parents in individual special educational support. After each lesson I send all parents a summary of what we did or recommendations for home preparation. I also send this summary to the teachers and, in the case of social skills training, to the class teachers and teacher assistants. At the end of the school year, we evaluate the provision of individual special educational support. We send the evaluation to students' parents/guardians and then we plan the individual special educational support for the next school year on the basis of the evaluation."

Greater emphasis on students' parent involvement was evident in responses by school special educators who primarily work with students with speech and language impairments. As Sarah illustrated:

"It is carried out in the quiet environment of a workroom modified for these purposes. The advantage is the large number of aids and immediate feedback. It takes place individually or in groups of up to four students. Special educational methods and techniques are used. Immediately after the lesson, the teachers are informed about the student's performance, the possibilities of adjusting the teaching in the classroom and the use of aids. Parents, who may sometimes be present for obvious reasons, are also informed..."

In terms of the content of the individual special educational support, the participants' statements indicated adaptation to a specific student and their support needs. For example, for students with specific learning disabilities, who represent by far the largest target group of the intervention, activities focused on the development of cognitive functions and activities related to the development of reading and mathematical skills were common. This was described by Andrea:

"I adapt the content of each lesson to the needs of specific student. Most of the time I have the lessons divided into three parts. The first part focuses on concentration of attention, spatial orientation, visual differentiation or auditory analysis. In the second part, we focus on reading comprehension or reinforcing grammar rules. We end the lesson with a relaxation activity – a relaxation exercise or a game."

Specifically, some school special educators who primarily work with students with behaviours that challenge others, emphasised how the individual support provided space to talk to students and develop their social skills. For example, Ema reflected:

"I find it meaningful if I can work with an individual, not in a group. I don't work in the form of tutoring, but I'm creating a space for a student where they can come up with a problem they are solving in class in a calm atmosphere and then together, we look for ways to solve the problem, what tools to use, what strategies to choose. I try to incorporate art activities, such as painting and modelling, into the lessons."

Statements provided by school special educators also pointed to the tailoring of the content of individual special educational support according to the nature of the students' disability and learning needs - for example, school special educators supporting primarily students with mild intellectual disabilities placed greater emphasis on the development of reading, communication and social skills. As Michaela illustrated:

"Together with the students we work on compensating for their weaknesses and developing their specific skills, but we also focus on most of the Czech language curriculum - primarily on working with and understanding the text, we try to find methods that will help the students in their learning, we work with compensatory aids and sometimes we create them to be tailor-made for the student, we also focus on the students' social development, etc."

Breadth of student groups supported by school special educators

On average, school special educators reported working "often" or "sometimes" with students from 6.25 categories (SD = 2.35, range 0–12) out of the twelve student groups included in the survey, indicating a relatively broad clientele. A Kruskal–Wallis test revealed significant differences in the breadth of clientele across the five contract-size groups, $H(4, N = 439) = 33.00, p < .001$. Staff in very small contracts of less than 0.25 FTE reported the narrowest clientele ($M = 4.73$ student categories), whereas those employed on 0.75 FTE reported the broadest clientele ($M = 6.98$), with educators on 0.25, 0.5 and 1.0 FTE positions also working with roughly 6.4–6.6 student categories on average. A similar pattern emerged for length of experience in the role: the breadth of clientele differed significantly across the five experience groups, $H(4, N = 439) = 29.74, p < .001$. Respondents with less than one year of experience reported a narrower clientele ($M = 4.69$ student categories) than their colleagues with 1–2 years ($M = 5.52$), 2–5 years ($M = 6.32$), 5–10 years ($M = 6.55$) and more than 10 years of experience ($M = 6.86$).

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to answer three research questions.

Research question 1: Which students do school special educators most engage with?

School special educators in the Czech Republic predominantly work with students with specific learning disabilities, with 96.4% engaging with this population frequently. Over half (55.6%) identify these students as their primary caseload, reflecting the concentration of such students in mainstream rather than special school settings. The second most common groups include students with speech and language impairments (60.1% frequent engagement) and those with behaviours that challenge others (49.2%). Importantly, approximately three-quarters of educators regularly support students from non-Czech language backgrounds (76.3%) and those experiencing social disadvantage (72.9%), indicating their role extends beyond traditional disability categories to address broader educational equity concerns. Students requiring more intensive support, including those with intellectual disabilities and autism spectrum conditions, represent smaller proportions of mainstream school caseloads, likely reflecting continued placement patterns in special schools within the Czech system. Our exploratory analysis further indicates that school special educators with larger contracts and longer experience tend to work with a broader spectrum of student groups. This pattern aligns with workload studies on SENCOs and similar specialist roles, which suggest that limited time forces professionals to prioritise students with the most complex needs, whereas more generous time allocation enables them to extend support to a wider range of learners with less intensive but still significant needs (Curran & Boddison, 2021; Dobson, 2019; Gardner et al., 2016). Consistent with Czech research portraying the school special educator as a professional with a wide and gradually expanding remit in inclusive schools (Zilcher & Svoboda, 2019), our findings suggest that greater contract size and longer tenure do not only increase the volume of work but also broaden the reach of specialised support across diverse student groups.

Research question 2: How important is providing individual special educational support?

Individual special educational support constitutes the core professional function of school special educators, with 88.6% providing this service at least weekly. This frequency substantially exceeds other professional activities, including consultations with teachers (82% frequent engagement) and work with teaching assistants (75%), establishing direct support as the profession's defining characteristic. The centrality of individual support remains consistent across different student populations, with over 89% of educators working with various disability groups providing weekly direct services. This direct service orientation contrasts with international trends

documented by Stephenson et al. (2022) in Australia and Struyve et al. (2018) in Europe, where special education professionals increasingly serve consultative rather than direct instructional roles, suggesting the Czech model represents a distinctive approach to inclusive education support.

Research question 3: How is individual special educational support implemented?

Individual support operates through a systematised delivery model characterised by small-scale provision (one-on-one or maximum four students), flexible scheduling, and content differentiation. Educators employ two primary scheduling approaches: during regular class time using 'available hours' or after school, with many implementing hybrid models based on student age and needs. Content varies significantly by disability type - students with specific learning disabilities receive structured three-part sessions focusing on cognitive development and academic skills, whilst those with behavioural challenges emphasise social skills and problem-solving through individualised approaches. Successful implementation relies on systematic collaboration with classroom teachers, teaching assistants, and families, including regular progress updates and coordinated planning. This model challenges traditional dichotomies between direct service and collaborative practice (Paulsrud & Nilholm, 2023), demonstrating how intensive individual support can be embedded within comprehensive collaborative frameworks whilst maintaining both service intensity and educational integration.

Our findings contribute significantly to international understanding to the role of school special educators. While previous research indicates that in other European countries SENCOs are shifting away from direct student support towards teacher consultation (Struyve et al., 2018), our data demonstrate that direct special educational support remains essential in mainstream settings. The high frequency of direct support (88.6% providing weekly sessions) and systematic delivery approach documented in our study offers a viable model for other education systems seeking to enhance their inclusive practices. Additionally, our detailed mapping of support distribution across different populations of students with special educational needs addresses a significant gap in international literature about how special educational support is allocated in practice. These findings have important implications for both policy and practice in inclusive education globally.

Even in the context of providing individual special educational support, participants' accounts show the importance of collaboration with teachers, teaching assistants and other stakeholders, including parents of students with special educational needs. These findings are entirely consistent with the findings of studies that point to the importance of collaboration between school special educators and other teaching staff (Struyve et al., 2018, Stephenson et al., 2022; Paulsrud & Nilholm, 2023).

Our findings reveal an important tension between direct service delivery and collaborative practice that merits further exploration. While 88.6% of Czech school special educators provide weekly direct support, our qualitative data demonstrate that effective practice depends heavily on collaborative relationships with teachers, teacher assistants, and families. This suggests that the direct service model does not preclude collaboration but rather requires it for successful implementation. The Czech experience challenges binary conceptualisations of 'direct versus consultative' models prevalent in international literature (Stephenson et al., 2022), instead demonstrating how direct service can be embedded within collaborative frameworks.

Research data show that forms of individual special educational support provided to students with special educational needs are quite varied and are usually specifically modified in proportion to the needs of the student. At the same time, however, the results suggest that some topics may be unintentionally undervalued in this care. For example, social skills development only appeared in the research responses of special educators working with students with behaviours that challenge others or intellectual disabilities; yet it is social skills development that should be a key part of intervention for many students with special educational needs (Vlachou et al., 2016).

The findings from the research also indirectly point to the great diversity and therefore also the demanding nature of the profession of school special educators. In the context of other recent studies documenting the under-appreciation of professionals focused on supporting students with special educational needs (Colum & Mac Ruairc, 2023; Curran & Boddison, 2021), the question then arises as to how far this professional burden on these support team members is accentuated in the overall systemic setting of their important profession.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The findings offer several important implications for educational practice, policy development, and professional preparation in inclusive education settings.

Professional training and development

The research reveals that school special educators work with a broader range of students than traditionally anticipated. Three-quarters of participants regularly support students from non-Czech language backgrounds and those experiencing social disadvantage, suggesting that **professional training programmes should expand beyond traditional disability-focused curricula** to include competencies in supporting linguistic diversity and addressing social disadvantage.

Given that 88.6% of educators provide weekly direct services, **pre-service and in-service training must thoroughly prepare educators for direct service delivery**, including individualised assessment, intervention planning, and progress monitoring across different disability categories. The need for enhanced professional preparation identified in our study aligns with international research documenting gaps in special education legal knowledge among both special educators and school administrators (Casale et al., 2024). This suggests that the Czech challenges with professional training reflect broader international patterns rather than context-specific deficits.

Service delivery models

The study documents two primary scheduling approaches: during regular class time and after school hours. Schools should develop **flexible scheduling approaches** that consider individual student needs, family circumstances, and intervention requirements, as each model presents distinct advantages and challenges.

The research demonstrates that **effective support delivery requires systematic collaboration** between school special educators, classroom teachers, teaching assistants, and families. Schools should establish **structured communication systems** including regular progress updates and coordinated planning to ensure consistency across educational environments.

System-level implications

The demanding nature of school special educators' roles underscores the need for **adequate resources, administrative support, and recognition** of their essential contributions to inclusive education. **Policy makers should recognise the viability of direct support models** when developing inclusive education frameworks, as the findings demonstrate that direct service delivery can be systematically integrated into mainstream education whilst maintaining collaborative practice.

These implications underscore the complexity of inclusive education support and the need for comprehensive approaches addressing professional preparation, service delivery models, collaborative practice, and system-level support.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

This study presents several notable strengths that enhance its contribution to the international literature on special education support. First, the **large-scale empirical evidence** (n=439) provides substantial statistical power and represents one of the most comprehensive examinations of school special educators' roles in Central Europe. The **34.6% response rate** from the 1,268 educators contacted demonstrates reasonable participation for survey research in educational settings.

Second, the **mixed-methods design** combining quantitative survey data with qualitative open-ended responses offers both breadth and depth of understanding. The systematic approach to data collection, including **content validation through expert review** and **pilot testing**, strengthens the instrument's reliability and validity.

Third, the study addresses a significant **research gap** by providing the first large-scale empirical evidence of how direct special educational support is systematically delivered in mainstream schools. Whilst previous international research has focussed primarily on consultative aspects of special education support, this study documents a unique model of direct service delivery that challenges dominant narratives about support team roles.

Finally, the study's focus on a **Central European context** provides valuable international comparative perspective, particularly relevant for other education systems developing or expanding inclusive education services in similar post-transition contexts.

However, several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. The primary limitation stems from the **survey methodology**, which did not allow researchers to enquire further or verify understanding of complex or unclear participant statements. This constraint may have limited the depth of insights, particularly regarding the nuanced implementation of individual support practices.

The study's **geographic specificity** to the Czech Republic may limit the generalisability of findings to other educational contexts with different policy frameworks, cultural contexts, or stages of inclusive education development. The Czech model's emphasis on direct support may reflect the country's relatively recent development of inclusive education since 2016, potentially limiting applicability to more established inclusive systems.

Future research should address these limitations through direct observational studies, international comparative research, and effectiveness studies examining student outcomes associated with different models of special education support delivery. Future research should also focus on other characteristics that may determine the effectiveness of school special educators, such as workplace adaptability, which has already been proven as a key factor in other teaching professions (Martin et. al, 2021).

CONCLUSION

This study provides the first large-scale empirical evidence of how direct special educational support is systematically delivered in mainstream schools, challenging the dominant international narrative that support professionals primarily serve consultative roles. The findings reveal that school special educators in the Czech Republic dedicate the majority of their professional time to providing individualised support, with 88.6% delivering weekly direct services to students with special educational needs.

The research demonstrates that effective inclusive education support requires both specialised direct intervention and collaborative practice. School special educators work predominantly with students with specific learning disabilities (96.4%), whilst also supporting diverse populations including those with speech and language impairments, behavioural challenges, and students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Their practice is characterised by highly individualised approaches, delivered either one-to-one or in small groups of maximum four students, with content carefully tailored to each student's specific needs and disability characteristics.

These findings contribute significantly to international understanding of inclusive education support systems by documenting a viable model of direct service delivery that maintains strong collaborative relationships with teachers, assistants, and families. The Czech experience offers valuable insights for other education systems seeking to enhance their inclusive practices, particularly in demonstrating how direct support can be systematically integrated into mainstream education without compromising the collaborative elements essential for inclusive success.

The study's implications extend beyond the Czech context, providing evidence that direct special educational support remains not only relevant but essential in contemporary inclusive education. As education systems worldwide continue to develop their approaches to supporting students with special educational needs, this research offers both a framework for practice and a foundation for future international comparative studies examining the effectiveness of different support delivery models.

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