

Social inclusion into mainstream classes: Voices of high school students with congenital physical disabilities

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This qualitative study examines obstacles hindering social inclusion into mainstream classes from the perspective of Czech high school students with congenital physical disabilities. Data obtained from in-depth interviews were subjected to a situational analysis, with results indicating that the participants ($N=10$) perceived as challenging their social inclusion into mainstream classes, which took place in four phases. The study participants reported three elements which can be seen as barriers to their social inclusion: (1) their classmates' lack of information regarding special educational needs, even not being informed that a such a student would be joining the class; (2) the presence of an assistant in the classroom; and (3) the lack of out-of-school interactions of the participants with their classmates. To avoid these challenges and to facilitate the social inclusion of students with disabilities into the class, it is recommended to concentrate on anticipative psychosocial class preparation as well as on strengthening social interactions based on cooperative learning and disability awareness techniques.

Introduction

Since the processes of formal education play a unique role in the life of nearly every individual in developed countries across the world, it is essential to ensure access to education for all students, including learners with congenital physical disabilities. To achieve this goal, the concept of inclusive education has been recognised for decades as a global trend in *Education for all* debates (Ainscow, 2005; Florian & Becirevic, 2011; Forlin, 2010). This means not only the education of *all* students in the same classroom, but also the empowering of learners with congenital physical disabilities to build social networks and thus to be socially included in classes (e.g. Hoffmann, Wilbert, Lehofer & Schwab, 2020; Zurbriggen, Venetz & Hinni, 2018). Bossaert, Colpin, Pijl and Petry (2013) suggested that social inclusion in the high school context can be defined using four key themes: (1) friendships among students with and without congenital physical disabilities; (2) reciprocated interactions among students with and without congenital physical disabilities; (3) social acceptance status in class; and (4) self-perception by students with congenital physical disabilities of being accepted by their classmates.

The current state of research regarding the particular components of social inclusion shows that social inclusion of students with congenital physical disabilities into regular educational settings remains quite challenging. Regarding the issue of friendship, many studies emphasise that students with congenital physical disabilities may experience difficulties in forming and maintaining friendships, as these learners on average have fewer friends (Mamas & Avramidis, 2013; Schwab, 2018) as well as receiving fewer nominations of being a friend than do their classmates without disabilities (Avramidis, Avgeri & Strogilos, 2018; Pijl, Frostad & Flem, 2008). Additionally, a literature review indicates that even when students with congenital physical disabilities manage to establish

friendship relationships, these tend to be less stable (Frostad, Mjaavatn & Pijl, 2011), or may be of lower quality, as these students attend outings with friends less often, may have no one identified best friend, and are involved in fewer activities with friends in educational settings (e.g. Vaughn & Elbaum, 1999; Wiener & Schneider, 2002). Hogan, McLellan and Bauman (2000) found that students with congenital physical disabilities describe feeling a sense of belonging and acceptance only half as often as their classmates without disabilities as a result of these experiences.

Empirical evidence on social interactions among students with congenital physical disabilities and their classmates consistently shows that peers without disabilities may be apprehensive or reluctant to work on common tasks with students with congenital physical disabilities (Brown, Ouellette-Kuntz, Lysaght & Burge, 2011), or they may incline towards a merely assistive role rather than an equal and cooperative one in social interactions with students with congenital physical disabilities (Butler & Hodge, 2004). Furthermore, other field investigations confirm that this student population is more often recorded as having fewer interactions with their classmates during breaks (e.g. Avramidis, 2010; Schwab, 2015). These results are consistent with studies by Hanková and Vávrová (2017) and Porter (2014) reporting that learners with congenital physical disabilities display efforts to interact and communicate with their peers during breaks, but they experience a lack of interest in interactions from their peers.

Recent studies on social acceptance among classmates in regular settings have found that students with congenital physical disabilities are at greater risk of being less accepted and are more often rejected by peers (e.g. Nepi, Fioravanti, Nannini & Peru, 2015). Furthermore, they have been shown as a vulnerable group in terms of higher risk of school aggression (Faris & Felmlee, 2014) and bullying (e.g. McNamara, 2013; Rose, Monda-Amaya & Espelage, 2011; Shore, 2014). Thus students with congenital physical disabilities tend to report feelings of isolation, loneliness and alienation, all of which are considered contributing factors towards a lower sense of belonging, safety and acceptance in mainstream classes (Nepi, Facondini, Nucci & Peru, 2013; Pijl, Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010).

Focusing on students' self-perception of their social acceptance, the vast majority of investigations have indicated that learners with congenital physical disabilities are generally less socially accepted in mainstream classes and report more feelings of loneliness compared to their peers without disabilities (Cambra & Silvestre, 2003). This research evidence also corresponds with Czech investigations, as Trhlíková (2009) found that 17% of students with congenital physical disabilities feel that they are marginalised or neglected in the classroom. Similarly, Vítová, Balcarová and Linhartová (2013) showed that these learners perceive themselves as being in the lower half of the mainstream class in terms of influence and sympathy.

Several scholars have pointed out that social ties with peers are an important component of inclusive education (Hay, Payne & Chadwick, 2004; Laws & Kelly, 2005). Therefore, it should be taken into consideration that high school students with congenital physical disabilities also need to create reciprocal relationships filled with mutual support and help

from classmates, since only then they can be socially included into the classroom. Following the current empirical evidence showing that students with congenital physical disabilities may often experience negative social labelling by their peers in the educational context, it is essential to make sure that learners with congenital physical disabilities have a voice in social matters that affect them in mainstream educational settings (see Bron & Veugelers, 2014; Bouke & Mentis, 2013).

With this background, previous international research has emphasised the need to address inclusive education issues from the perspective of the key stakeholders – students with congenital physical disabilities (e.g. Lindner, Alnahdi, Wahl & Schwab, 2019; Schwab & Alnahdi, 2020). Nevertheless, these students' voices regarding social inclusion into mainstream high school classes have been largely ignored, as previous studies have mostly focused on quantitative evidence relating to primary school students' perceptions on social inclusion into the class (e.g. Frederickson & Turner, 2003; Ring & Travers, 2005). More specifically, what is missing in the international literature is research focusing on barriers to the social inclusion of students with congenital physical disabilities into mainstream high school classes.

To begin to fill these gaps, the current study aims to examine physically disabled students' perception of the obstacles hindering their social inclusion into Czech mainstream classes. The main research question which guided the study was: *How do high school graduates with congenital physical disabilities retrospectively (a maximum of five years since high school graduation) perceive the obstacles hindering their social inclusion into Czech mainstream classes?* Including student views into the research design is a unique and reliable strategy to obtain valuable insights into meeting the challenges of social inclusion in mainstream classes. The eventual goal is to contribute to policy formation towards securing a more inclusive educational environment based on the values of equality, social justice and mutual respect, all of which are shown to be significant predictors of students' social inclusion into mainstream classes (e.g. Cefai & Cavioni, 2013).

Research context

Our research is framed by Czech educational practice based on *individual integration*, which enables the placement of learners with congenital physical disabilities into mainstream settings by providing them necessary special pedagogical or psychological care (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic, 2002). This model, however, still tends to treat these learners as students with special educational needs who require the provision of support measures to fulfil their education opportunities (see Act No. 82/2015 On Pre-school, Primary, Secondary, Higher Vocational and Other Education).

According to Pivarč (2017), education based on individual integration may generate tacit inequalities within an educational system by emphasising students' 'differences', 'disability', or 'deficits', concepts closely related to the medical model perspective (see Florian & McLaughlin, 2008; Olkin, 2001). This may therefore potentially contribute to the stigmatisation of students with congenital physical disabilities in the class. Indeed,

Tannenbergerová (2012) suggests that the educational concept of individual integration may exclude students with disabilities from mainstream educational settings altogether, noting that learners 'special needs' may be appropriately saturated only in homogenous classes of segregated schooling. To alleviate these potential challenges, Czech disabled student-related school legislation has been supplemented by the 2015 'pro-inclusive amendment' (Straková, Simonová & Friendlaenderová, 2019; Štech, 2018). The amendment elucidates the broader concept of 'special educational needs' within which a vertical model for the assessment of degree of disability has been described along with the resulting need for support measures. This implementation of support measures for students with congenital physical disabilities has been anchored both legislatively and methodologically (see Čadová et al., 2015; Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic, 2019) with the goal of enabling this student population to achieve their educational potential as well as become equal members of school community.

Although the position of high school students with congenital physical disabilities in the Czech educational system has gradually come to be influenced by inclusive elements, educational practice itself cannot yet be described as fully inclusive, as the system remains within a 'transitional period' between school integration and the greater implementation of pro-inclusive measures (e.g. Pivarč, 2017).

Methods and procedures

Research design and data collection techniques

Following the research aim, a qualitative research strategy based on the technique of semi-structured interviews was chosen for the data collection (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Based on the concept of Bossaert et al. (2013) regarding social inclusion in the high school context, the basic interview scenario was thematically divided into four key themes. In thematic section 1, the participants were asked questions regarding their experiences and views on *friendships* with their classmates without disabilities, with special attention devoted to their friendship network as well as individual friendships in the classroom. Section 2 focused on the interviewees' *interactions with students without congenital physical disabilities*, seeking information on whether they worked together on tasks, participated in class group activities, and had extracurricular interactions or spent free time with their peers. Section 3 asked the participants to consider and describe their *self-perception of being accepted by classmates* in terms of their feelings of peer acceptance and belonging in the class. Section 4 covered questions regarding the participants' views on their *social acceptance status in the class* to determine the interviewees' perspective on their social status or experiences with peer rejection during their period of high school attendance.

According to the participants' statements during the interview, the above-mentioned scenario questions were supplemented by further relevant inquiries to encourage the participants to speak as freely as possible. To ensure that the basic interview-scenario questions were clear and understandable (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015), pilot-testing on a comparable target group was undertaken prior to the data collection, without any question

changes arising from the pilot study. The final form of the basic interview scenario can be found in Appendix A.

A total number of 10 semi-structured interviews was conducted between April 2016 and January 2018 in the Czech Republic. Thematic saturation was noted within the first 8 interviews, with most of new information produced in this dataset. Nevertheless, two additional interviews with students with congenital physical disabilities were conducted to confirm saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Based on the participants' living situation, preferences and availability, all interviews took place online via the *Skype* platform. The interviews lasted an average of 90.1 minutes ($SD = 16.57$, range = 77-123 minutes). All interviews were recorded within five years of the participants' graduation from high school. Using this retrospective perspective, we aimed to enhance participant openness in re-constructing the given educational reality to the greatest extent possible following evidence suggesting that humans are typically able to more authentically recall autobiographical experiences from the past 5 to 10 years (Berntsen & Rubin, 2012; Sigelman & Rider, 2017). Similarly, Graf and Ohta (2002) report the suitability of this time frame in terms of the individual's ability to recall essential facts connected with the prior lived experience.

Participants

The following selection criteria were used for recruitment. Each participant: (1) was identified as having 'congenital physical disability' (cerebral palsy / spinal muscular atrophy); (2) was attending a mainstream high school class (ISCED 3, see OECD, 2015); (3) was educated in the class on the basis of the individual integration model; (4) had graduated from high school a maximum of 5 years prior to the interview.

The first nine participants were selected based on first author's personal contacts with nine high school students with congenital physical disabilities as an active member in Czech support groups for people with disabilities. The tenth participant was acquired through the snowball technique.

Overall, nine participants were male and one female. The participants were diagnosed with 'cerebral palsy' ($N=7$) or 'spinal muscular atrophy' ($N=3$); using a wheelchair ($N=9$) or crutches ($N=1$). The participants included those who had studied at a general high school ($N=3$), secondary technical school with a final exam (Czech *Maturita*) ($N=2$), secondary technical school ($N=1$), or secondary vocational school ($N=4$). The average time since the participants had graduated was 4.0 years.

Research ethics

The Research Centre of Faculty of Humanities, Tomas Bata University in Zlín, approved this study, and all EU ethical guidelines regarding social science research were observed in conducting the study. Participants were involved in the research on a voluntary basis and could revoke their decision to take part at any time during the research. Based on the prior informed consent of the participants, their exact statements were recorded and

anonymised, with the audio recording of the interview deleted immediately after the transcript was completed.

Data analysis

The research material was analysed using selected procedures of situational analysis (Clarke, 2005), a method which indicates the necessity to analyse an entire situation in its unreduced complexity (Clarke, 2003). The research situation itself – social inclusion of high school students with congenital physical disabilities into mainstream classes – is therefore the basic unit of the analysis (Clarke, 2005; Clarke, 2014). The data were analysed as follows.

1. The data were subjected to an open coding procedure supplemented with memos with the goal of identifying all key elements present in the situation with regard to the social inclusion of high school students with congenital physical disabilities into mainstream classes.
2. A messy map was created based on 75 identified elements.
3. The messy map elements were classified into 12 categories on an ordered map (see Appendix B), with the key category of ‘Social inclusion into the class’ saturated by seven elements:
 - a. Efforts to be included into the class;
 - b. Spiteful acts of classmates;
 - c. Disregard of classmates;
 - d. ‘For-gain’ interest of classmates;
 - e. Resignation to relationships with classmates;
 - f. Change in the behaviour of classmates, and
 - g. Acceptance by peers in the class.
4. Using positional analysis, it was found that the research sample of ten participants construed varying degrees of quality of relationships with their high school peers, subsequently reflected in the continuity of their social inclusion into the class. However, following the research aim, the study builds primarily on testimonies obtained from 6 out of the 10 participants (P1–P6), each of whom viewed their relationships with classmates and thus their social inclusion into mainstream classes as relatively challenging (Figure 1).
5. A relational map was chosen as a main cartographic tool guiding the data interpretation (e.g. Clarke, 2005; Nordtug, 2020). The goal of the map is to visualise the relationships among the seven above-mentioned elements (a.-g.) saturating the key category of ‘Social inclusion into the class’ as well as the remaining 68 elements present in the situation of inquiry as articulated in the data (Figure 2).

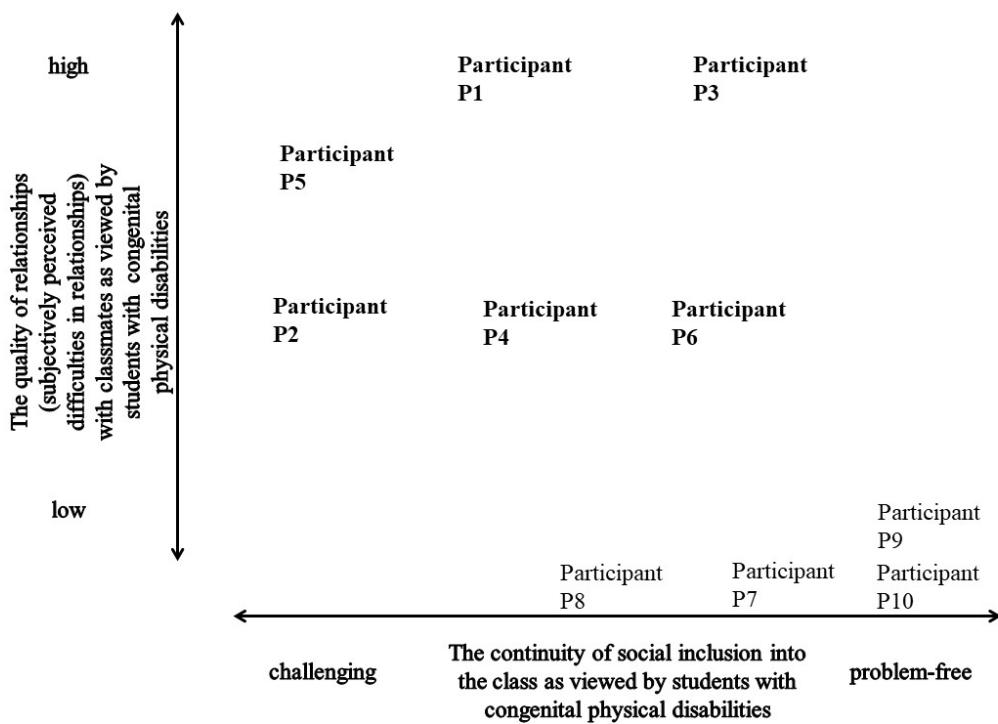
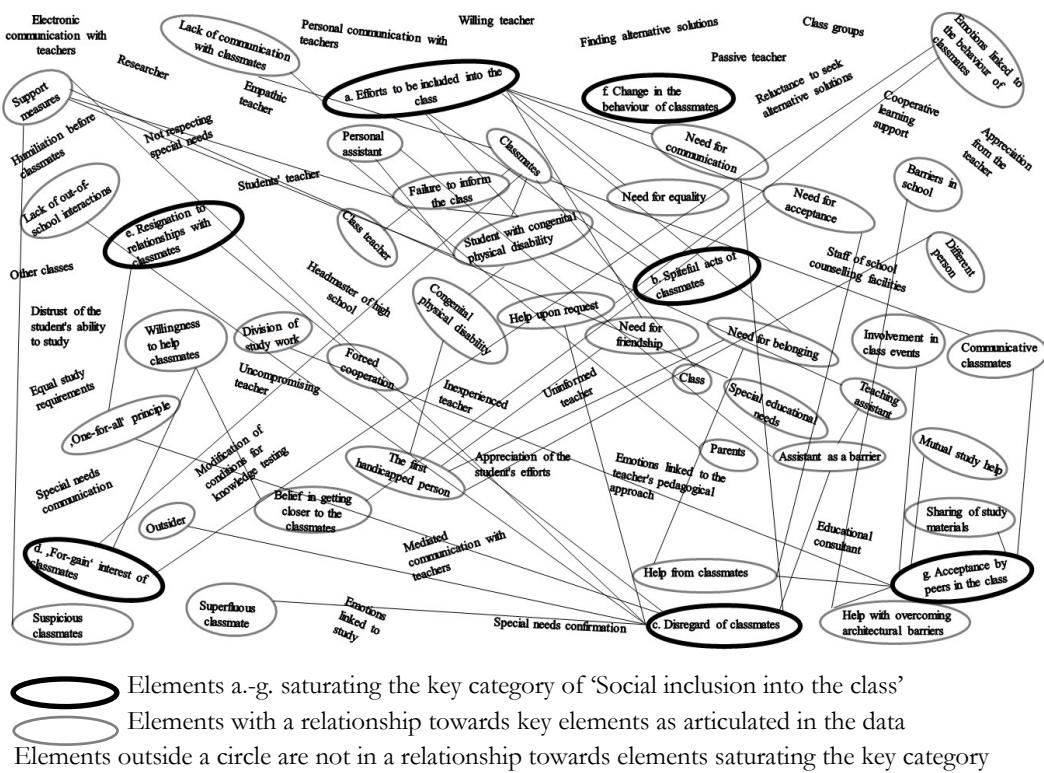


Figure 1: A positional analysis of the subjective views on the quality of relationships with classmates by a student with congenital physical disability and the continuity of their social inclusion into the class

Results

The relational analysis based on the views of the six participants (P1–P6) who emphasised challenges in their social inclusion shows that one significant element influencing their social inclusion in the class was the fact that they were each among the first students with congenital physical disabilities attending their high school. This is evidenced by the in-vivo code of *first handicapped person* and the related discourse of ‘differentness’ emerging in the participants’ statements: ‘I was the very first handicapped person attending that school. Some [classmates] just passed me by as if I were an E.T., as if I had come from another planet, a different kind of person’ (P4). It was further noted that *lack of information* about the very presence of a classmate with congenital physical disability as well as lack of knowledge regarding how their new classmate’s *special educational needs* would impact the educational process contributed to challenges in participants’ social inclusion into the class. For example, participant P2 stated: ‘No one had given them any information. They didn’t know why I was in the class, why I got scared, why I had different tests. And of course if you don’t know, you behave accordingly.’ (P20).



Elements a.-g. saturating the key category of 'Social inclusion into the class'

Elements with a relationship towards key elements as articulated in the data

Elements outside a circle are not in a relationship towards elements saturating the key category

Figure 2: Relational analysis focusing on the social inclusion of students with congenital physical disabilities into the class (use web or PDF reader 'zoom in' function to read)

To gain a deeper insight into the situation of inquiry, we will now concentrate on an explanation of how these input elements determined relationship forming and the associated social inclusion issues of high school students with congenital physical disabilities into the class. In this context, the results are structured around four key themes as revealed by the relational analysis; these themes focus more specifically on the social inclusion of students with congenital disabilities into mainstream classes:

- (1) Efforts of high school students with congenital physical disabilities to be included into the class;
- (2) Subjectively perceived spiteful acts and disregard from classmates;
- (3) 'For-gain' interest of classmates and resignation of students with congenital physical disabilities; and
- (4) Change in the behaviour of classmates and acceptance by peers in the classroom.

1. Efforts of high school students with congenital physical disabilities to be included into the class

Although the participants felt that their classmates initially did not seem interested in communicating with them, the participants reported their own *efforts to be included into the*

class collective of uninformed classmates, showing the desire to satisfy the *social needs of communication, belonging, friendship and equality*. Specifically, one of the participants shared her intention to start a conversation with her classmates, but her *peers* showed *disregard* towards her attempts to speak with her:

I found that [my classmates] didn't know how to treat me. They were probably afraid to even ask how to treat me so I wouldn't be offended. So I considered communication to be important at that time, although I was the one who had to start a conversation. 99% of the time the kids never approached me first to talk. (P4)

Another participant spoke about various strategies to encourage contact to establish relationships with her classmates, following the need of belonging and equality in the class collective:

I felt quite strongly the need to belong there and to be given some responsibility. So I volunteered to be examined first, or I would help someone with something. I would work as the class treasurer to encourage their contact with me. I mean, I also needed to feel equal with them. That it isn't only that I'm as good as them, that I can manage it, but also that I am bringing a clear contribution to them. (P1).

Participant P6 reported her efforts to be included into the class as she sought to find a friend:

In the beginning I felt the need to get involved with the classmates because I never had any friends. So from time to time I tried to make contact with someone and make friends with someone. (P6).

2. Subjectively perceived spiteful acts and the disregard of classmates

Despite the efforts by the participants to establish relationships with their classmates, success did not come easily, as the participants subjectively perceived elements of *s spiteful acts* in the behaviour of *classmates*. The girls started to be spiteful towards me when they saw that I was going to ask them [to fetch] something; they didn't want to bring it to me.'(P5).

Additionally, the participants discussed their *classmates' disregard* for interaction and cooperation, noting that *help was provided* to the participants *only upon request*, all of which resulted in their feelings of loneliness:

For example, they saw that I had dropped something, but they didn't ask: "Do you want me to pick it up?" I always had to ask someone in the class [...] I felt pushed away; I wanted to talk to them, but they did not want to, so it was weird. I decided not to impose myself on them.'(P4).

In some cases, the participants associated the disregard of their classmates with lack of interest to work on a common task during group activities:

And maybe even a reluctance to work with me at all. Like I was the black sheep of the group and when I joined a team, people tried to join some other team. (P6).

As evidenced from participants' voices, the challenges in forming friendship relationships with classmates and thus social inclusion into the class were associated with the *lack of out-of-school interactions* with the peers: 'Well, I was commuting and they were living together in the hall of residence because they were from all corners of the country, and thus I was isolated from them. We just didn't spend any time together.' (P5) as well as by the participants' perception of the personal or teaching *assistant as a barrier*: 'The assistant was always present, and when we didn't get to communicate at school, then there was virtually no other chance.' (P1).

Above all, the relational analysis showed a *lack of information* of the students without a disability about physical disability-related support measures as well as subjectively perceived *suspicion of classmates* about the legitimacy of the participants' study results to be other contributing factors towards worsening participants social inclusion into the class collective:

[My classmates understood it in the way that] "You're the one who has got it easy, and if we had it so easy we would have better marks now. So you're getting off easy, but not us." (P3).

Thus the participants stated that although they tried to be socially included into the class, their classmates' rejection generated the feeling of being *outsiders* and *superfluous classmates*:

I felt like an outsider there. I mostly felt I didn't fit in and it didn't matter to them if I was there or not. When I was gone for a month, no one even bothered to get in touch with me. (P1).

3. 'For-gain' interest of classmates and resignation of students with congenital physical disabilities

Despite the overall rejection by their classmates, the participants also experienced temporary *'for-gain' interest* from their peers in study difficulties: 'Paradoxically, everybody came up to me when they hadn't done their homework because I always did mine, so everyone always wanted to copy it.' (P1).

Even being aware of this 'for-gain' interest of their peers, the participants were *willing to help* their classmates because they *believed* this approach would help them in *getting closer to classmates* and thus fulfilling their *social need for acceptance, belonging and friendship*:

Being a fool I said: "Yeah, sure," in the hope that if I lent them homework or advised someone, everyone would talk to me and be my best friend. I wanted to be a member of the class collective with all the trappings, not only because you are a member when they need to copy something from you, but in every situation. (P1).

Similarly, participant P4 believed her willingness to help could potentially contribute towards forming relationships with classmates as well as becoming a full member of the class community:

I would say that they even partially despised me, and I thought that if I let them copy something, maybe it would be better. I wished I could fit in completely with the class team. But many times, it was the other way around, it made the situation even worse.'... [which, from an emotional point of view]
... it just makes you sad and I was sorry for that. (P4).

The subjectively perceived lack of authentic interest of non-disabled students in their classmate with congenital physical disability was manifested by *forced cooperation* in the class:

No one wanted to work with me. And when they were forced to do so, they only cooperated because they had to....
[and the '*one-for-all*' principle of cooperation during group work]
... When we were in the group, they hardly ever communicated, so as far as I can remember, I usually worked it out myself and they just wanted to read what I had done. (P1).

For some participants, this gradually led to their *resignation to relationships with their classmates*:

When I tried to get involved sometimes, they didn't give me a chance, and it was like: "Why am I even trying when it's not worth it anyway?" When it still wouldn't work, I just gave up. (P2).

4. A change in the behaviour of classmates and acceptance by peers in the classroom

Nevertheless, under the influence of long-term personal experience along with their classmates' increased contact with them, the participants indicated that their *peers* eventually started to *communicate* with them in the class, which subsequently contributed to recognition of their presence in the mainstream class as legitimate: 'When some classmates started to talk more about school issues with me, everything gradually started to relax and a few of those people began to treat me quite normally.' (P4).

This change of perspective was associated with *acceptance by classmates*: 'Then they suddenly began to accept me more. Like they started to figure out who I am, what I am, what I want, what I don't want.' (P2).

The relational analysis further shows that full social inclusion of the participants into the class at the educational level was manifested in varying ways. The participants referred to *mutual study help* within small class groups: 'When someone was absent from school, we would bring homework to him, or when we were sick ourselves' (P3); *sharing study materials*: 'I scanned the study materials for them, and they would help me copy their notes many times' (P4); the equal *division of study work* in cooperative learning: 'My friend did the detailed part for me in class, and then I did the protocol for the sake of fairness' (P3); and

getting involved in class events: 'We had a recital there and I was involved. I even participated in the dance rehearsals' (P4).

At the interpersonal level, the acceptance of the participants by their classmates was manifested through *help to overcome architectural barriers* in the school: 'When there were stairs, one of the boys carried me in his arms and the other took the wheelchair.' (P3). In some cases, acceptance by classmates was associated with natural *help from classmates*, which led to saturation of the *need for acceptance and belonging*:

They also helped me when the teaching assistant was absent. For example, my classmate joined me at my desk and wrote down notes for me in literature class. Instead of always having to plan things myself, someone else did it for me and that meant so much, because I felt that someone was thinking of me and that meant he cared about me and that I was finally a part of the class. (P3).

Discussion and study limitations

The aim of the presented study is to better understand obstacles hindering social inclusion into mainstream high school classes by eliciting the views and experiences of individually integrated high school graduates with congenital physical disabilities. The data show that participants retrospectively construed varying degrees of relationship quality within the high school classroom. Four of the ten interviewees perceived their relationships with classmates as unproblematic, while six participants subjectively perceived certain challenges with regard to their social ties in mainstream classes.

Based on the narrations of the six participants (P1–P6, see Figure 1), social inclusion of Czech high school students with congenital physical disabilities in mainstream classes was shown to be a long-term process which may be accompanied by difficulties. As *friendships and reciprocated interactions* are important components of social inclusion (see Bossaert et al., 2013), the participants stated their need to make friends and become an equal member of a class collective, thus they made consistent efforts to be socially included in the class. At first, however, their high school peers did not seem interested in establishing friendships or interacting socially with them, as evidenced from lack of communication as well as few interactions during class group activities. Using a relational analysis (Clarke, 2003), we found that these challenges were influenced by three main elements which can be seen as barriers to participants social inclusion: (1) classmates' lack of information not only regarding special educational needs, but even about a student with a congenital physical disability joining their class; (2) the presence of an assistant in the classroom; and (3) the lack of out-of-school interactions with their classmates.

In addition, the analysis revealed that the unfulfilled efforts of the participants to socially include themselves into the class and the associated rejection from classmates had an impact on the participants' perceptions regarding another component of social inclusion, i.e. their *social acceptance status in the class* (see Bossaert et al., 2014). The students with congenital physical disabilities noted that they felt like outsiders and that they were superfluous in the class, resulting in a lack of a sense of belonging in the class collective.

These findings correspond with prior studies suggesting that the negative attitudes of classmates may generate feelings of inferiority in students with disabilities (see Freeman & Alkin, 2000; Harper & Peterson, 2001). Our results are also consistent with other investigations indicating that knowledge and awareness of students regarding congenital physical disabilities (Vignes et al., 2009), as well as the role of the teaching assistant in the classroom (Ring & Travers, 2005; Wendelborg & Tøssebro, 2011) may significantly influence peer attitudes towards students with congenital physical disabilities.

Further, our work highlights the importance of personal experience and long-term contact among classmates, especially in terms of the affective and social development of *all* learners. According to the study participants, more opportunities for communication with their peers in the class proved to be an important accelerator towards positive changes in the behaviour of their classmates. The participants indicated that they gradually found close friends to help them in their studies, and whom they were able to help in return. Additionally, the interviewees associated the change in their classmates' behaviour with their own increased involvement in class events, all of which contributed to their feeling of *being accepted* by classmates, an important component of social inclusion (see Bossaert et al., 2013). These findings confirm other studies showing that increased frequency and duration of personal contact (Allport, 1954; MacMillan, Tarrant, Abraham & Morris, 2013) is an important factor affecting attitudes of students towards their peers with congenital physical disabilities and thus their successful social inclusion into mainstream class.

Since social inclusion is a key issue both within and outside of educational settings, the Czech educational system should focus on: (1) the socio-psychological preparation of a class for the arrival of a classmate with congenital physical disability (see Čadová et al., 2015), including informing the class about the purposes and legitimacy of the support measures provided to this student population; (2) the application of *disability awareness* techniques (e.g. instructing all learners in ways to overcome barriers in the school environment using a wheelchair) to provide an experience-based perspective on people with disabilities for high school students without disabilities (see Block, Klavina & McKay, 2016; Morin, Maiano, Tracey & Craven, 2017); and (3) the promotion of cooperative learning as well as peer tutoring in the classes in order to strengthen social interactions and the acceptance of diversity in the class (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2012).

Our research reflects the state of the implementation of reforms aimed at a greater shift towards inclusive education in the Czech school system from the perspective of a central actor – students with congenital physical disabilities. Since the perspectives presented come essentially from the actors for whom the system was designed and instituted, the obtained results should be a key source in identifying the strengths as well as the weaknesses of prevailing educational practice. Therefore, the findings presented in this study may become the basis for planning and organising future evaluation services in the field of education.

The following limitations can be identified in the presented research.

- (i) online interviewing using *Skype* is generally not considered an effective form of data collection (e.g. Brown, 2018; Taylor, 2020). In contrast, some scholars (Jenner & Myers, 2019) suggest that online interviews may contribute to a higher degree of responsiveness. Future research should use diverse forms of interviewing (i.e. face-to-face, online, phone interviews) to enhance data reliability.
- (ii) the research sample was relatively small and not gender-balanced, with a higher proportion of learners from secondary vocational schools. Future research should therefore balance the sample in these areas.
- (iii) the recruitment of the participants based on personal contacts can potentially contribute to bias (e.g. Johnson & Christensen, 2008). To avoid this methodological challenge, the data should be verified by multiple data sources (i.e. focus group interviews) collected by other members of the research team, with participants being asked to review the findings immediately after the data analysis.
- (iv) the data reflect a retrospective view (an average of four years after graduation) of the participants which may have become distorted over time, i.e., with lack of data on potential inclusive policy changes in participants high schools occurring between their graduation and data collection period. As this would require appropriate data collection and verification, this aspect was not included into the interview scenario. Therefore, as a natural extension of our research a prospective study with high school learners studying contemporaneously might be conducted to obtain an overview of the *current state of the implementation of inclusive policy* in the Czech educational context.
- (v) Although the primary goal of our study was to give a voice to learners with congenital physical disabilities, each interview only reflects the perspective of one actor of education, thus interviews should also be conducted with other stakeholders involved, i.e. classmates, teachers and assistants, to create a more holistic picture of the chosen phenomenon.

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Appendix A: Basic interview scenario for semi-structured interview

Thematic section 1: Questions regarding interviewees' experiences and views on friendships with their classmates during their high school attendance:

1. Could you tell me about your relationships with your high school classmates?
2. What about your friendship network in the class?

Thematic section 2: Questions regarding interviewees' experiences and views on interactions with their classmates during their high school attendance:

1. What can you tell me about group activities in the class?
2. What about your experience with extracurricular interactions with classmates during your high school attendance?

Thematic section 3: Questions regarding participants' self-perception of being accepted by their classmates during their high school attendance:

1. Can you tell me about your self-perception regarding the degree of your acceptance by classmates?
2. What about your sense of belonging in the class?

Thematic section 4: Questions regarding participants' experiences and views on social acceptance status in their class during their high school attendance:

1. Please describe your feelings in the class / classmate collective.
2. How do you retrospectively perceive your social status in the high school class? How did it change during your high school attendance?

Appendix B: Ordered map

Individual human actors	Collective human actors	Discursive constructions of individual and collective human actors
Student with congenital physical disability	Class Class groups	Empathic teacher Willing teacher
Parents	Other classes	Inexperienced teacher
Headmaster of high school		Passive teacher
Classmates		Uncompromising teacher
Class teacher		Uninformed teacher
Students' teacher		Communicative classmates
Educational consultant		Suspicious classmates
Teaching assistant		Outsider
Staff of school counselling facilities		Superfluous classmate
Personal assistant		Different person
Researcher		Assistant as a barrier
Communication	Teacher's pedagogical approach	Cooperation with classmates
Personal communication with teachers	Finding alternative solutions Reluctance to seek alternative solutions	'One-for-all' principle Forced cooperation
Electronic communication with teachers	Modification of conditions for knowledge testing	Sharing of study materials Mutual study help
Mediated communication with teachers	Cooperative learning support	Division of study work
Special needs communication	Appreciation of the student's efforts Not respecting special needs Humiliation before classmates Equal study requirements Appreciation from the teacher	Involvement in class events
Help	Social inclusion into the class (Key category guiding the data interpretation)	Social needs
Help with overcoming architectural barriers	I. Efforts to be included into the class	Need for friendship
Help from classmates	II. Spiteful acts of classmates	Need for communication
Willingness to help classmates	III. Disregard of classmates	Need for belonging
Help upon request	IV. 'For-gain' interest of classmates V. Resignation to relationships with classmates VI. Change in the behaviour of classmates VII. Acceptance by peers in the classroom	Need for acceptance Need for equality
Determining elements	Spatial elements	Emotions

Congenital physical disability	Barriers in school	Emotions linked to the behaviour of classmates
Special educational needs		Emotions linked to the teacher's pedagogical approach
Belief in getting closer to the classmates		Emotions linked to study
Special needs confirmation		
Distrust of the student's ability to study		
Failure to inform the class		
Lack of out-of-school interactions		
Lack of communication with classmates		
The first handicapped person		
Support measures		

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