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Author: Małgorzata Kitlińska-Król

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STRENGTHENING THE EDUCATIONAL POTENTIAL IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS – A PROJECT CO-FINANCED FROM THE EU FUNDS

Małgorzata KITLIŃSKA-KRÓL

Uniwersytet Śląski, Katowice; malgorzata.kitlinska-krol@us.edu.pl, ORCID: 0000-0003-4430-3938

Abstract: The article presents the main assumptions of the project “Bytom school = assurance and guarantee of high-quality education” and attempts to assess the effectiveness of activities implemented during the school year. The presented project evaluation results were obtained from pupils and teachers of one of the primary schools. The analysis of the research material allowed to exhibit the short-term goals achieved, as well as the factors positively and negatively affecting the quality of the activities implemented. The reflections/recommendations from the explorations conducted will allow to direct further work in order to achieve the project’s objectives to a greater degree.

Keywords: educational project, support, EU funds, extracurricular activities.

Introduction

On the first of May 2004, Poland joined the European Union as a member state. Joining the community opened new opportunities for our society and expanded the perspectives of both rich and poorer regions of Poland. The EU convergence policy gives a chance to bridge the gap between the quality of life in richer and poorer countries, as well as allows to level the opportunities in economically less developed regions.

The assumptions of the European Union's activity were based on two principles: subsidiarity and solidarity. In order to implement these standards in action, EU funds were created. These funds are called structural funds because they are tools for implementing the European Union's structural policy. Under this policy, activities are carried out to reduce disparities in the development of individual countries.

Today there are three main types of European Funds:

- European Social Fund (ESF) – its main goal is to support activities aimed at improving the quality and accessibility of jobs and employment opportunities in the European Union. This fund finances the areas that implement the European Union's cohesion policy.
- European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) – the largest fund; its main goal is to increase economic and social cohesion in the European Union. This fund finances all programs which help regions that lag behind.
- European Cohesion Fund (CF) – its goal is to support actions aimed at leveling economic and social conditions in all regions of the European Union. It has a national range, and it supports large projects in the field of environmental protection and transport infrastructure.

The European Social Fund was created based on the provisions of the Rome Treaties of 1957. This fund is targeted at specific social groups and not at institutions. Since 2000, it has been tasked with implementing the Lisbon Strategy objectives with the abovementioned goals. Projects (operational programs) can be financed up to 85% from the ESF, while the remaining amount is required from national resources (institutions and private entities).

The European Regional Development Fund was established in 1975 to combat the effects of the global economic and fuel crisis of 1972 and to expand the Union by two countries, the United Kingdom and Denmark. This fund supports the endogenous development of regions by promoting local development initiatives and encouraging the development of small and medium-sized companies (Tomaszewicz, 2014; cf. Gorzelak, 2007; Oręziak, 2008).

The project, whose implementation was analyzed in this study, namely “Bytom school = assurance and guarantee of high-quality education”, is co-financed under the Regional Operational Program of the Silesian Voivodeship for 2014-2020, and it implements the assumptions of the European Social Fund.

The project has been implemented since 1 September 2018 and will be continued until 30 June 2020 in the Bytom municipality; it is also consistent with the Municipal Revitalization Program and individual diagnoses of the needs of each of the supported schools. The main objective of the Project was determined on the grounds of the above-mentioned documents and it concerns the reduction and prevention of early school leaving and provision of equal access to good quality primary and secondary education in the Bytom municipality by supporting four schools from the municipality (Primary School No. 6, primary School No. 9, Primary School No. 16 and Secondary School No. 10). The implementation of the concept involves the implementation of a comprehensive program of activities related to:

- providing support in the form of didactic-compensatory and developmental classes, as well as classes for students with special educational needs – 284 students (including 142 women),

- equipping 3 schools with laboratories, thus enabling teaching based on the method of experiments in the field of nature and/or mathematics, with the use of ICT equipment,
- increasing the competences (through training and courses) of 21 teachers (including 18 women)¹.

The implementation of the programs financed from the EU funds is subject to evaluation. It consists of the following stages:

- Ex-ante evaluation (analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the potential of the region to be financed).
- Mid-term evaluation (evaluation during the program and introduction of the necessary adjustments).
- Ex-post evaluation (analysis of the completed project, with a particular emphasis on the results).

Additionally, the EU funds granted are subject to control (auditing) and monitoring. The audit is conducted mainly by the administration of the European Commission; in this case the representatives of the Marshal's Office of the Silesian Voivodeship. The monitoring is based on the collection of financial and statistical data, with a particular focus on the regularity of financial operations and basic documentation of the implementation of services (schedules, work charts, registers, contracts, etc.). The ongoing control is carried out by the headmaster of the school participating in the Project and the coordinator, the head of the Education Department (in Bytom) co-implementing the project.

The article presents the material describing and analyzing the evaluation of the Project at the mid-term stage implemented at Primary School No. 6 in Bytom.

Methods

The research process was conducted using the diagnostic survey method with a questionnaire. The survey questionnaire, forwarded by the Project Coordinator acting on behalf of the Education Department, contained five questions (4 closed-ended, 1 open-ended) and was anonymous. The documentation of the Project "Bytom School..." was also analyzed – basic documents (application, recruitment regulations, etc.), work plans drawn up by teachers (mathematicians, two speech therapists), entries in class registers, reports, etc.

The study group was deliberately selected – it consisted of students of Primary School No. 6, who after the recruitment and qualification procedure became participants of the Project "Bytom School ...". 77 people took part in the evaluation survey; all pupils completed the

¹ Project documentation available in paper form in SP6 and on websites; cf. <http://www.sp6bytom.pl/bytomska-szkola> [accessed on 15 June 2019]; <https://www.bytom.pl/bytomska-szkola-pewnosc-i-gwarancja-wysokiej-jakosci-ksztalcenia> [accessed on 15 June 2019].

submitted document correctly. Therefore, individual questionnaires were qualified for further diagnostic findings.

A total of **79 completed evaluation surveys** were analyzed, as two Project participants were supported and provided with various types of activities.

The elaboration of the results of the evaluation survey was divided into two parts:

- in the first one, the value of the interactions during individual classes with a speech therapist was determined (15 students),
- in the second one, the values of maths classes (64 students) were assessed: both the developing and the compensating ones.

The research was implemented **in June and July 2019**, and the main research goal was to evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of the activities planned under the auspices of the Bytom School of Activities Project. The practical goal of the research was to specify the strengths and weaknesses/shortcomings of the educational support undertaken and implemented. As a consequence, the above findings were to make an attempt at assessing the short-term effects of the Project (ensuring equal access to good quality primary education – regardless of gender, disability, special educational needs, financial well-being of the family; motivation for development/learning; broadening knowledge and skills – reflected in higher school grades, a constructive way of spending time after classes; providing the laboratory with ICT equipment, increasing teachers' competence through their participation in training, etc.) and determining whether short-term goals create a chance to achieve long-term goals, i.e. limiting and preventing early school leaving as well as strengthening educational potential.

Research findings results

Ultimately, the support within the framework of the “Bytom School ...” Project will cover a group of 90 students (45 girls) and 3 teachers (3 women) at Primary School No. 6.

In the first year of implementation, 80 students, diagnosed and presented herein, took part in the Project. Three pupils, due to reasons beyond the control of the organizers or persons implementing supportive activities, resigned (discharge from school, family reasons, lack of care for the child returning home). Therefore, in the school year 2018/19, **77 students** took part in the project - two students participated in math classes and speech therapy; **hence the total number of participants is 79 people**. This group constituted the core for making mid-term conclusions, i.e. during the program, and their outcomes are shown in this study.

The remaining group – at least 13 pupils – will be recruited in September 2019.

The sociodemographic distribution of the respondents participating in the survey was as follows.

15 students took part in **classes with a speech therapist**, of which 13% were women (2 girls) and 87% were men (13 boys). The children attended five different grades. The detailed percentage distribution is presented in figure 1.

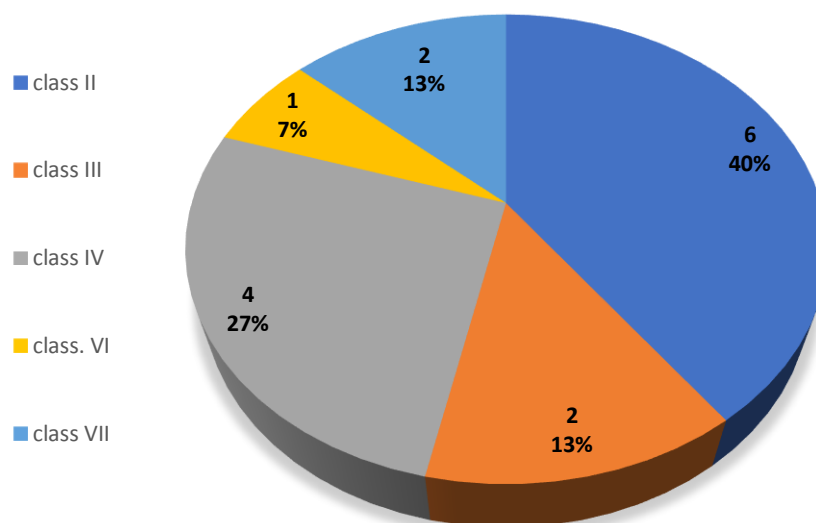


Figure 1. Data distribution including the class grade of the examined participants of speech therapy classes. Source: own research.

The above data reveal that the majority of pupils working with a speech therapist are children at the first stage of education – 80% of participants. The most abundant group was made up of second grade pupils – 6 participants (40%). The representatives of the second stage of primary school were definitely less numerous – 20%, i.e. 3 students.

Speech therapy should be provided as early as possible to develop language and communication skills of the youngest children. It is then possible to prevent the secondary psycho-pedagogical and social effects of speech disorders. The above distribution is typical for the population of children in our country.

The attendance at classes was **100%**. Most parents appreciated their children's participation in the abovementioned classes and paid great attention to it. They reported the pupil's absence by telephone asking to change the date of the meeting.

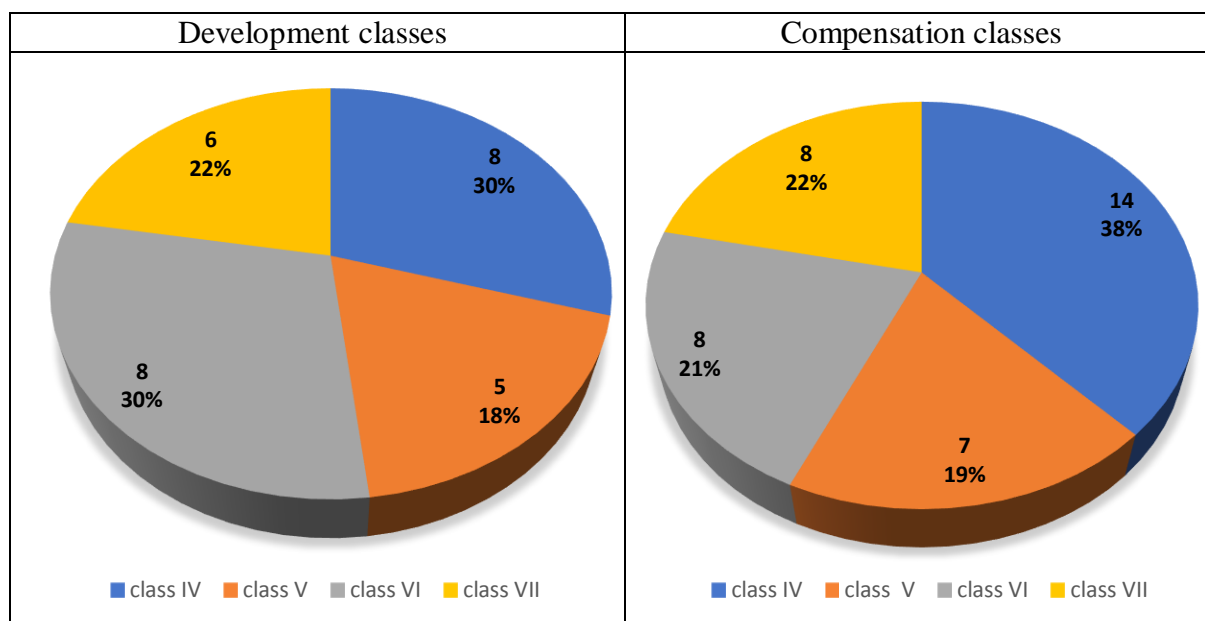
64 pupils took part in **math classes**, including **27 respondents** who were supported by means of *development classes in mathematics* and **37 students** were supported by *didactic and compensatory classes*.

In the first group of mentees, boys constituted the majority (56%), while in the group of respondents taking advantage of mathematical compensatory classes, the majority were girls (54%). In total, 32 boys and 32 girls participated in math classes (GOAL – equal access by gender).

The attendees of math classes in the 2018/19 school year were students of four different grades. A detailed percentage distribution is presented in the charts in Table 1.

Table 1.

Data distribution including the class grade of the examined participant of math classes



Source: own research.

According to the data presented in the comparative table, the largest group was constituted by the population of the fourth-grade pupils (38%) participating in the compensatory math classes. In the development math classes, the same representation was exhibited by the group of pupils of the fourth and sixth grade, 30% (8) participants each.

A low number of groups – in both types of math classes – was demonstrated by fifth-grade pupils. During the recruitment of participants for the Project, the fifth-grade pupils often reported the lack of possibility of enrolling for the enterprise due to a large number of extracurricular activities in which they participated outside the school. A high percentage of the sixth- and seventh grade pupils (8 participants each) taking part in the compensatory math classes probably constitutes a preventive measure before the upcoming eighth grade exam.

The attendance in the development math classes was 98%.

With regard to the first question in the survey, the respondents assessed their satisfaction with the participation in the “Bytom school = assurance and guarantee of high-quality education” project. All students (100%) indicated that they are **satisfied with the participation** in the above undertaking. The participants of all types of classes declared full satisfaction.

The pupils also **evaluated the way the extracurricular activities were conducted**. The data show that 73% of the respondents considered the manner of conducting **speech therapy classes** to be “much more ...” and “more interesting than regular classes at school”. The ability to carefully match the tasks to the individual needs/capabilities of the pupil is certainly an important advantage of the assessed classes conducted by a speech therapist.

„The classes are run just like regular school classes” – such statement was expressed by 27% of the respondents (4 participants). They were second grade pupils who were puzzled by the question and faced this dilemma. Alternative answer options given in the above-mentioned

survey question were unfortunately not clear enough – disjunctive for students (“much more interesting ...” and “more interesting”).

The data on math classes reveal that in 89% of responses, the respondents who participated in *development math classes* assessed that they were implemented in “a much more interesting way than regular school classes;” in addition, 4% of the pupils indicated that these classes were conducted in “a more interesting way ...” Similarly, very high marks for the manner of conducting *math, didactic and compensatory classes* were given by the respondents from the second group. Compensation classes were considered to be “conducted in a much more interesting way” by 65% of the pupils and “conducted in a more interesting way” by 32% of the respondents. Only 3% of the pupils reported that math, didactic and compensatory classes were carried out “in the same way as school classes”, which does not mean that they are conducted at a low level; on the contrary, it may prove recognition for the teacher who conducts classes under the Project, since teachers who implement everyday math lessons with the pupils enjoy their authority, they are liked by the pupils of Primary School No. 6.

All the pupils surveyed (**100%** answers) stated that participation in extracurricular classes – speech therapy/math classes – **increased their knowledge and skills**.

In addition, by answering the next question in the survey questionnaire, the pupils specified in detail how their participation in the Project affected them.

The data presented in figure 2 indicate that, in the self-assessment, 34% (10) of the children covered by the Project support found that by participating **in classes with a speech therapist, they developed their learning skills**. Of all the respondents, 21% (6) stated that “participation in the Project was an interesting way to spend their free time”, and in the opinion of 17% (5) pupils, participation in the project encouraged them, inter alia, to read and do speech therapy exercises (2 students).

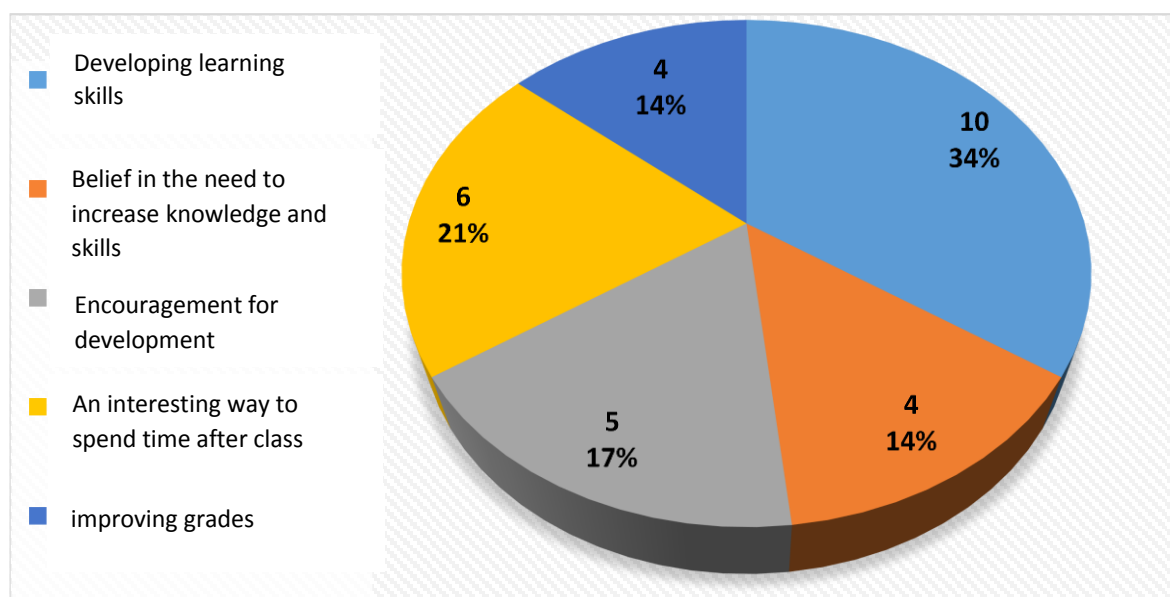
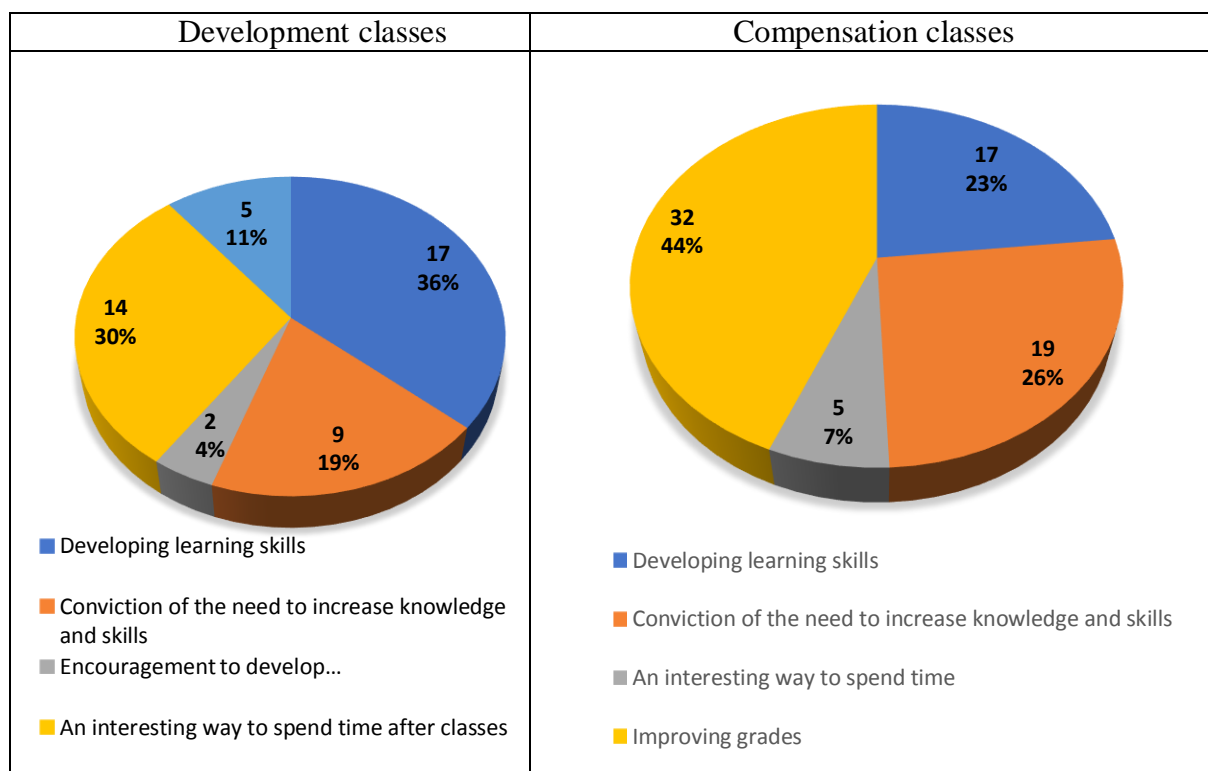


Figure 2. Self-assessment of the impact of participation in classes with a speech therapist made by the pupils surveyed.

The juxtapositions of quantitative data illustrating the responses of the pupils participating in development and compensation math classes clearly **differ** among each other in terms of the indications given, and they are not the same as the results assigned to speech therapy classes (Table 2).

Table 2.

Subjective assessment of the impact of participation in the project made by the surveyed students receiving support in the form of math classes



Source: own research.

The most important change pointed out by the pupils participating in **the development classes**, resulting from the participation in the Project, was **“the development of learning skills”** – **36%** of responses (23% of such answers were given by the pupils participating in the compensatory classes). I think that the above data, just as it occurred in the results of the survey conducted earlier with pupils taking part in the speech therapy classes, confirm the positive implementation of the main objectives of the Project.

This increase in pupils' skills is confirmed by register entries and annual reports of mathematicians and speech therapists. The teachers indicate an increase in the pupils' competences with regard to mathematical and linguistic activities.

The pupils supported in the Project by means of **compensatory math classes** emphasized that participation in the classes resulted primarily in “improving their grades” in the subject – **44%** of responses (and **11%** of the pupils participating in development math classes).

Extracurricular activities are **“an interesting way to spend time after classes,”** as stated by **30%** of the respondents taking part in the development math classes (and **7%** of such indications from the pupils participating in the compensatory classes). This statement can be regarded as flattering for the organizers and people providing support as part of the Project classes, because pupils appreciate this constructive way of spending time after class. This indication may also exhibit a peculiar maturity of the pupils, a willingness to use the development opportunities offered to them wisely. **The attendance** at *the development math classes* was **98%**.

There are essential factors that could have had a “strengthening” effect on the results presented here:

- high teacher involvement, non-standard, activating methods and forms of work during math classes,
- a friendly (even therapeutic) atmosphere of the classes,
- a system motivating pupils to participate in the compensatory math classes used by the person conducting the classes under the Project, also supported by the subject teachers (“additional involvement credits” in mathematics, which could positively strengthen the pupil's partial grades).

The pupils participating in the development math classes were very much involved in their implementation, while other pupils needed systematic motivation to participate in the compensatory math classes. Their enthusiasm was often short-lived, they were satisfied with their single success, i.e. after obtaining a positive grade in mathematics in school classes they had second thoughts on the need for further participation in the classes offered by the Project. The level of their attendance was 95%.

Another positive symptom observed was the relatively high percentage of statements regarding **“the belief in the need to increase knowledge and skills”** declared by **19%** of respondents from the group participating in the math skills development classes and **26% (!)** of indications provided by pupils from the group taking the compensatory math classes. The pupils made a self-assessment unburdened with the consequence of translating it into a school mark – they came to the conclusion that they “need” - want to increase their mathematical knowledge and skills. Internally induced motivation – of the student is more likely to be implemented in practice, as the student looks for information, wants to improve his/her competences. What is more, such a student wants to undertake this effort “for himself/herself” and secure the need. This is a valuable element of the support provided to the pupils under the auspices of the “Bytom School ...” Project. I hope that with the involvement of the teachers and parents of the children, it will be successfully taken advantage of and will result in a permanent improvement of the pupils’ mathematical competence.

Participation in this enterprise encouraged 4% of the respondents to develop and learn within the field of mathematics. This element was not recognized by the pupils attending the compensatory classes. There was no single respondent in the entire team that indicated that the participation in the Project had no positive impact on them.

In the open-ended questionnaire, respondents were asked to indicate additional activities organized by the school in which they would like to participate. This question also revealed varied answers in the two examined groups of children supported by means of math classes. The participants of the compensatory math classes – 37 respondents – did not indicate any form of extracurricular activities.

The participants of the development math classes declared the opposite, although not all of them gave an answer to this question (15 people). A group of 12 people indicated (multiple answers) willingness to participate, inter alia, in additional classes on: nature (4 pupils), physics (3 pupils), computer science (2 pupils) and sports classes (2 pupils). The latter were already taken into account earlier by the respondents participating in speech therapy classes; generally they were children at a younger school age. Older pupils, as presented above, focused their attention on the need to participate in classes related to specific school subjects. In individual indications, they exhibited their willingness to participate in math as well as technical, language (English) and history classes.

Physical activities in various sports disciplines are offered to pupils and students at school. They enjoy unflagging interest and, according to the evaluation data, there is still an increased demand for them.

The “Bytom School...” Project implemented in Primary School No. 6 assumed the implementation of the activities in accordance with specific quantitative and formal requirements. The most important areas of support were: raising key competences in the field of mathematics and English, as well as speech therapy support for the pupils. During the two years of the project duration, 50 hours of classes should be performed with each group or an individual pupil working with a speech therapist outside school hours.

The entries in the Project documentation confirm the implementation of 29 hours of the didactic and compensatory classes with 5 groups and 29 hours of the development math classes with 4 groups. The assumed 50% minimum limit of the classes was implemented with a surplus in each of the groups. This number of educational hours could not be achieved when referred to the speech therapy classes. Here, each of the 15 participants received 42 hours; the remaining time - 8 hours of classes per pupil - was transferred to the next school year. The inability to meet the assumed limit of the classes (50 hrs. per year with 15 participants) was due to a three-week break in the implementation of all school didactic activities caused by a nationwide strike of teachers.

The teachers implementing the project classes worked on the basis of the curricula constructed for each group or an individual mentee included in the speech therapy support. The classes were conducted in a non-stereotypical and equivalent manner, promoting attitudes

of respect for dissimilarities and differences, recognition of equal rights and obligations regardless of gender or disability. At the stage of the task implementation, both materials and presentations as well as forms of work were adapted to the needs of the individual/group. The implementation of the above tasks is confirmed by the class entries made in the register, the collected work charts, and the products of the children's activities.

The teachers – speech therapists – raised their competences to work with pupils and students with special educational needs by participating in one of the two trainings planned under the Project. They used the acquired knowledge and skills in their ongoing work (register entries).

Discussion of the results with practical references

The analysis of the collected research material shows that the “Bytom School ...” Project implemented at Primary School No. 6 in the 2018/19 school year was exercised correctly and brought positive results.

The advantages include:

- timely implementation of the classes planned for the first year of the Project supporting both mathematically gifted pupils and those with educational deficits (didactic and compensatory classes); it was executed with a surplus of hours;
- high grades for particular types of classes indicated by the pupils in the evaluation surveys – All of the pupils (100%) were *satisfied with the participation in the Project*; 100% of the respondents assessed that they *increased their knowledge and skills* (here: linguistic/mathematical, no other competences were diagnosed); 88% of the pupils rated speech therapy (73%) and math classes (97% and 93%) as being conducted in a *much more ... and more interesting way than the compulsory school classes*; 31% of the respondents *developed learning skills* in speech therapy (34%) and math classes (36% and 23%); 23% declared *improvement in their school grades* as a result of attending speech therapy (14%) and math classes (11% and 44%);
- provision of equal access to good quality basic education – regardless of gender, disability, special educational needs, financial wealth of the pupil's family,
- expansion of mathematical and language knowledge and skills reflected by higher school grades;
- constructive way of spending time after classes by the pupils;
- increase in the teachers' competence through their participation in training courses, etc.

Weaknesses were also registered in the Project implementation process, which include the following:

- lack of IT equipment caused by the prolonged purchase procedure,
- unspecified number of hours of the individual classes with a speech therapist,
- imprecise administrative issues related to the employment contracts concluded with the teachers and the School's own funds allocated e.g. for office supplies.

The above list is a list of formally verifiable attributes of the “Bytom School = assurance and guarantee of high-quality education” Project implemented at Primary School No. 6. They all determine the degree of implementation of the short-term goals, and thus the quality of the supportive measures taken. I think that the mid-term evaluation reveals positive prospects for achieving the long-term goals, i.e. reducing and preventing early school leaving, strengthening the educational potential among children, adolescents and adults from the Bytom municipality.

The final conclusions, which should constitute practical recommendations for further work on the implementation of the Project tasks, could be designated as follows:

- **to continue the commenced work supporting** the educational potential of the pupils (and teachers),
- to maintain (or increase) the previous evaluation scores of the Project classes obtained in the evaluation surveys described,
- to make the classes more attractive by using IT equipment,
- to maintain positive cooperation with the teachers, specialists from the School, and the Project coordinator representing the Department of Education,
- **to strengthen cooperation with the parents** to jointly motivate for systematic participation in classes.

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