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### **The system changes in education vs. the needs of a mildly mentally disabled student**

Why have the problems of education become so interesting to the public recently? Is this the result of political decisions which are not accepted by everybody with recognition? If so, this is not a subject worth scientific interest except that of sociologists or political scientists.

Perhaps it is not like that at all? There might, in the context of the results of educational research done all over the world, come the time for some reflections.

It is time to think about the sense, purposefulness and legitimacy of the changes which have become the reality of Polish school.

Z. Kwieciński (2000)<sup>1</sup> points out that education in Poland does not correspond to the new conditions which are characteristic of a democratic society. It is almost the same as far as the increasing autonomy of schools and teachers is concerned. The youth, however, despite the declarations of the animators of reforms do not leave schools with skills and it seems as if the main trend is still to favour encyclopedism. School is making no effort to develop interests in and a desire to learn particular subjects. Instead, we offer students boring classes, stereotypical, fixed interactions and school as the institution acting from the position of superior power in relation to students.

The fact that the quality of education in Poland leaves much to be desired has been proved by the results of international research. In the years 2000 and 2003, Polish students took part in the assessment of the effectiveness of education which was conducted under the auspices of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). In the year 2000, the survey covered 15-year-olds from 31 countries and in 2003 from 40 countries. The surveys assessed knowledge and skills in three broad areas of literacy: reading, mathematics and science<sup>2</sup>. In the first cycle of the research our results were rather weak compared with other countries. As regards reading literacy Polish students took 24<sup>th</sup> place (out of 31 countries) and their performance scores were amongst the weakest 25%. What is more, the

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<sup>1</sup> Kwieciński, Z. *Tropy – ślady – próby. Studia i szkice z pedagogiki pogranicza*. Poznań-Olsztyn, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> In 2003 scientific literacy was separated into two competencies: scientific thinking and problem-solving.

scores in mathematical literacy were much the same. As for scientific literacy, we took 21<sup>st</sup> place. Point values computed for the percentage of the maximum score showed that 21<sup>st</sup> – the best position is the weakest score at the same time– 58.75% (of the one which can be achieved). The scores in reading literacy account for 59.88% whereas the scores in scientific literacy account for 60.38%.

The results of the assessment, which were published in the report of I. Białecki and J. Haman (2000)<sup>3</sup>, caused consternation and started a heated discussion about the quality of teaching in Poland. Or, put simply they provoked widespread criticism and launched a search for the guilty ones, especially that the detailed analysis of particular variables proved how much mistaken we have been firmly believing the teaching standards in Poland are very high, a lot higher than in other countries. It turned out that within the main competency – reading literacy, as much as 8.7% of Polish students acquired only technical reading ability (they are able to read a text but cannot understand the information which it contains). For the whole population of the assessed students this indicator was: 6.2%. In the countries which achieved the best scores it did not exceed 1% (Korea) and 2% (Finland). Only 5.9% of Polish students got the highest scores compared with 9.4% in the whole assessed group<sup>4</sup>. For instance, in the highly ranked countries: 18.7% of the youth from New Zealand, 18.5% from Finland, and 17.6% from Austria reached the highest level of competency.

Another interesting thing is the correlation of students' scores with IQ. It turns out that the average IQ of Polish 15-year-olds is 99 points. Austrian students have IQ higher by 2-3 points and they take 4<sup>th</sup> place in the domain of reading literacy, 8<sup>th</sup> place in scientific literacy and 11<sup>th</sup> in mathematical literacy. On the other hand, American students with average IQ are higher in the rankings by 7 places on average. Thus, it was very easy to draw the conclusion that the problem is related to schooling, namely the low standards of teaching.

The year 2000 marked the beginning of the reforms in the system of education in Poland. It was firmly believed that the planned changes would improve the situation. In the year 2003<sup>5</sup> the third edition of the OECD assessment for students at age 15 was held. This time 40 countries participated and similar competencies were examined, namely reading literacy, mathematical literacy, and scientific literacy separated into thinking in science subjects and problem-solving. The data report came as a relief to us. Polish students took much higher

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<sup>3</sup> Białecki, I., Haman, J. *Program Międzynarodowej Oceny Umiejętności Uczniów OECD/PISA. Wyniki polskie – raport z badań.* <http://www.ifispan.waw.pl/pisa/raport.html>, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> In each of the participating countries about four thousand students were assessed.

<sup>5</sup> Białecki, I., Haman, J. *Program Międzynarodowej Oceny Umiejętności Uczniów OECD/PISA. Wyniki polskie – raport z badań.* Fundacja Res Publica, Ministerstwo Edukacji Narodowej i Sportu, 2003.

places in the rankings. In the domain of reading literacy, they came 16<sup>th</sup> (out of 40) while in 2000 they were 24<sup>th</sup> out of 31. In mathematical literacy 24<sup>th</sup> out of 40 as opposed to 24<sup>th</sup> out of 31 in 2000, and in scientific literacy 19<sup>th</sup> out of 40 as opposed to 24<sup>th</sup> out of 32. It would seem as if we should be proud because the scores were much better. The analysis of point values, however, does not give sufficient grounds for optimism. The mean score of reading literacy performance in the year 2000 was 59.88%, in 2003 – 62.13%, an increase of 2.25%; as regards mathematical literacy there was an increase of 2.5% (from 58.75% to 61.25%) and in scientific literacy an increase of 1.87% (from 60.38% to 62.25%). As far as problem-solving is concerned, Polish students received the lowest mean score when compared with the rest of the competencies which were assessed in 2003, namely: 60.88%.

Can one be glad with the above-mentioned findings? What do they reveal? What kind of life opportunities and prospects do they suggest for young Poles who are very likely to seek employment on the open, international job market? Young Polish people will definitely have to compete with their peers from wealthier countries, the countries with much longer democratic and capitalist traditions. And no one will give them any preferential treatment just because of their origin. The things which will count are skills, qualifications and the knowledge with which a young person will be able to achieve success or not.

Not all students are equally capable of getting educated. The data of UNESCO shows that about 33% of students fall behind with their studies (and this rate increases with age). That is why, since the mid 1990s such issues as teaching, educational needs of both disabled people and people with learning difficulties have attracted a lot of attention and become frequently discussed all over the world. The documents worth mentioning are: the Salamanca Declaration (1994)<sup>6</sup>, the Lisbon Strategy (2000)<sup>7</sup>, the Madrid Strategy (2002)<sup>8</sup> or the resolution adopted in Luxemburg (2002) – Education in Europe: diverse systems, shared goals for 2010<sup>9</sup>.

The Salamanca Declaration urges governments to give topmost priority to the improvement of their educational systems, in their policies and budgets, and to ensure that

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<sup>6</sup> *Deklaracja z Salamanki oraz wytyczne dla działań w zakresie specjalnych potrzeb edukacyjnych przyjęte przez Światową Konferencję dotyczącą potrzeb edukacyjnych: Dostęp i Jakość*, UNESCO, 1994.

<sup>7</sup> *Strategia Lizbońska (2000), Rada Europejska, posiedzenie w Lizbonie 23-24 marca 2000 – Konkluzje okresu prezydencji*: <http://ue.eu.int/fr/info/eurocouncil/indem.htm>; Komunikat Komisji Europejskiej przedstawiony podczas wiosennego posiedzenia RE w Barcelonie, „Strategia lizbońska – wprowadzanie zmian”, COM (2002) 14, wersja ostateczna, 15 stycznia 2002.

<sup>8</sup> *Deklaracja Madrycka (2002), Brak dyskryminacji i pozytywne działania dają w efekcie włączenie*, Europejski Kongres na Rzecz Osób Niepełnosprawnych, 20-24 marca 2002.

<sup>9</sup> *Edukacja w Europie: różne systemy wspólne cele do 2010*, Biuro Urzędowych Publikacji Wspólnot Europejskich, Fundacja Rozwoju Systemu Edukacji, Warszawa. 2002.

everyone regardless of their individual differences and difficulties have access to ordinary schools (The Salamanca Declaration..., 1994). That means opening up possibilities for and letting a disabled people to choose their own way of education. That postulate became one of the key words for the Polish reform of education in 1999.

The Madrid Declaration calls for tolerance and fight against xenophobia. It was there, at the European Congress on Disability where the statement: 'Disability is a human rights issue' became so popular (The Madrid Declaration..., 2002). Disabled people are just as other citizens so they are entitled to have the same human rights. They take every possible role in life, including the one of a student.

The postulates of the Lisbon Strategy were especially important from the perspective of educational actions. European Union leaders stated that 'investing in people and building an active and dynamic country of welfare' would give the grounds for the knowledge-based economy. Making this happen meant increasing investment in human resources and giving greater importance to continuing education. Worryingly, Europe has a high rate of young people who leave school without getting any qualifications. In 2003 the rate was 18.1% - much lower than 10% expected for 2010 (The Lisbon Strategy...,2002).

In the resolution *Education in Europe...*(2002) a lot is said about the need to improve the quality of education and training systems, the need to open up ET systems to the wider world and ensure that they are equally accessible to all. The document takes a close interest in the education of the disabled and people with learning difficulties and it firmly concludes that Europe cannot afford to waste the human potential of such a great number of people. Especially that the rates speak for themselves. The already mentioned data of UNESCO indicates that 33% of students fall behind with their studies. W. Pilecka (1998)<sup>10</sup> claims that about 20% of students of school age have learning difficulties. The analyses carried out by J. Pańczyk (2004)<sup>11</sup> show that the disability rate is 15% (data for 1997) with a growing tendency to at least 18%, one third of which concerns growing-age population.

In Poland the ideas which constitute educational rights for disabled people with learning difficulties are usually expressed with such words as: normalization, common education and improvement of quality of life. Their formal beginning was the year 1993 when 4 October regulation made it possible to form integrated classes. Thus, we have certain experience in inclusive education. What is more, the first cycle of primary education in the reformed

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<sup>10</sup> Pilecka, W. *Pedagogika osób z trudnościami uczeniu się*. [in:] Dykcik, W. (ed.), *Pedagogika specjalna*. Wydawnictwo UAM, Poznań, 1998.

<sup>11</sup> Pańczyk, J. *Przedmowa Książki, Pedagogika specjalna wobec zagrożeń i wyzwań XXI wieku*. WSPS, UAM, Poznań-Warszawa, 2004.

school system ended. Also, two cycles of gymnasium education were completed. The time has come for first reflections.

Are the system changes in education of disabled people reflected in the higher level of their school attainments and do these changes correspond with the needs of students with special educational needs?

That disabled students changed their preferences in the choice of the education way is an unquestionable fact. The findings of J. Pańczyk (2004) indicate that there was a quintuple increase, from 14 to about 71 thousand, in the number of students with special needs who attend regional schools - the ones nearest to their homes. The question is: how effective this education system is especially in the context of those students' special needs and abilities.

Both theoreticians and practitioners agree that it might be very difficult to include mentally disabled students in the common education in ordinary schools. (Z. Palak, 1993)<sup>12</sup>.

The research results show that teachers do not look with a favourable eye upon the idea of common education for mentally disabled students in an ordinary class. About 88% of them would not admit such students into their class (B. Oszustowicz, 1994)<sup>13</sup>.

Teachers' most common attitude toward mentally disabled student is largely based on pity and compassion. About 49% of the examined teachers have these attitudes. About 70% of teachers have an unconstructive approach which does not contribute to disabled people's development (I. Dajnowska, Cz. Kosakowski, 2003)<sup>14</sup>.

The research findings point the lack of congruence in what teachers say and do. On the one hand, 96% of teachers believe that it is possible to change mental disability (I. Dajnowska, Cz. Kosakowski, 2003). On the other hand, 60% of teachers do not and about 30% of them think there is a little likelihood the mentally disabled will find employment (I. Dajnowska, Cz. Kosakowski, 2003).

Very interesting in the context of fulfilment of disabled students' educational needs appear to be the research findings which concern the assessment of opportunities and needs by students alone. E. Minczakiewicz (2003)<sup>15</sup> stresses that disabled students' own personal

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<sup>12</sup> Palak, Z. *Z badań nad integracyjnym kształceniem dzieci niewidomych*. [in:] Ossowski, R. (ed.), *Sytuacja życiowa dziecka niepełnosprawnego w rodzinie*. Wydawnictwo WSP, Bydgoszcz, 1993.

<sup>13</sup> Oszustowicz, B. *Uczeń upośledzony w szkole masowej*. [in:] Fenczyn, J. Wyczęsany, J. (ed.), *Edukacja i integracja osób niepełnosprawnych*. PSON, Kraków. 1994.

<sup>14</sup> Dajnowska, I., Kosakowski, Cz. *Postawy nauczycieli szkół masowych w stosunku do upośledzonych umysłowo jako jeden z wyznaczników efektywności integracji*. [in:] Chodkowska, M. (ed.), *Wielowymiarowość integracji w teorii i praktyce edukacyjnej*. Wydawnictwo UMCS, Lublin. 2003.

<sup>15</sup> Minczakiewicz, E. *Młodzież niepełnosprawna i jej rodzice wobec integracji edukacyjnej*. [in:] Kazanowski, Z., Osik-Chudowska, D. (ed.), *Integracja osób niepełnosprawnych w edukacji i integracjach społecznych*. Wydawnictwo UMCS, Lublin. 2003.

choices of common education depend on the kind of disability they have. Mentally disabled students choose segregating education because of the fear they might be rejected and discriminated by their fully-abled peers. 19.6% of mentally disabled students are aware of their imperfection (E. Minczakiewicz, 2003). These tendencies are proved by the research carried out by M. Chodkowska (2004)<sup>16</sup>. The author advances a thesis that mentally disabled students are isolated and rejected by their peers. In generally accessible schools this was found to be the case for 69% of students and for 50% in integrated education. If we expand this group by adding the students who are isolated because of their unfavourable social situation, those rates are 78 and 70% respectively. It also turns out that the number of negative attitudes of fully-abled students towards their disabled peers goes up with years of common education. There are about 20% of negative choices more in higher grades than in early-school grades (70 to 50%) (M. Chodkowska, 2004).

A mentally disabled student faces a lot of problems in educational situations of an ordinary school. The most important ones are connected with cognitive disorders – the ability to cover the basic school curriculum content of general education which has been the same for mildly mentally disabled people as for the intellectually-abled since 1991. Other problems are related to adaptation abilities. Mentally disabled students find it much more difficult than their abled peers to adopt and conform to social norms. They need a lot of support and appropriate conditions to do it more easily.

Will they get such support in the environment of a generally accessible ordinary school?

The findings of the research which I did in grades I-III and IV-VI of generally accessible schools show that students with learning difficulties get results which indicate a mediocre degree of their adaptation to school situation. The CBI questionnaire of E. Schaefer and M. Aronson (J. Rembowski, 1972)<sup>17</sup> which I used in my research assesses school adaptation by attributing point values to descriptive grades. So, (+)90; (+)60 means very good degree of adaptation; (+) 60; (+) 30 – good; (+) 30; 0 – average; 0; (-) 30 – disordered; (-) 30; (-) 60 – severely disordered and finally (-) 60; (-) 90 – maladjustment.

The score of students with learning difficulties was: (+) 20.2 which means average degree of adaptation, yet the above-mentioned figure is very close to the value denoted as good adaptation. Unfortunately, at the second educational stage, in grades IV-VI, students gained the score of 4.01, still within average scores bracket, but the result is very close to the low

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<sup>16</sup> Chodkowska, M. *Problemy pedagogicznego wsparcia uczniów niepełnosprawnością intelektualną w zakresie społecznego funkcjonowania w klasie szkolnej*. [in:] Palak, Z., Bartkiewicz, Z. (ed.), *Wsparcie społeczne w rehabilitacji i resocjalizacji*. Wydawnictwo UMCS, Lublin. 2004.

<sup>17</sup> Rembowski, J. *Przystosowanie dzieci do szkoły*. „Kwartalnik Pedagogiczny”, 2. 1972

border of the bracket – close to disordered adaptation. As the research findings indicate, the level of school adaptation of students with learning difficulties goes down together with years of school education. It means that generally accessible school is not able to support a student with learning difficulties in overcoming adaptation problems.

Will the school be able to do it in the case of a mentally disabled student? Research was conducted to find out how mildly mentally disabled students adjust to the situation of a generally accessible school and it produced interesting findings<sup>18</sup>. It appears that the adjustment of the assessed students of grades I-III can be described as average (+) 1.73. However, the score close to the one of adaptation disorder is rather worrying. What is more, it is worse than the score received by mildly disabled students from special schools (+) 4.75.

Interesting conclusions can be drawn from the comparison between mentally disabled students and students with learning difficulties. We need to remember that opening up the education system for the needs and preferences of disabled students leads to the prediction that more and more mentally disabled students will choose education in a regional school – for avoiding stigmatisation. Another highly predictable thing is, unfortunately, that mildly mentally disabled students will become closest in their characteristics to students with learning difficulties (from generally accessible schools).

The way a generally accessible school copes with solving problems of students with learning difficulties will be prognostic in the context of possible educational success of a student with global disorders.

It is little wondering then that the decrease in the level of adaptation to school of students with learning difficulties, which is observed with years of education, is giving us great cause of concern. The score ranges from 20.2 to 4.01. How lower can it go down if the score of departure for mentally disabled students from generally accessible schools is – (+) 1.73. That is a real threat of those students' adjustment disorder. In addition, there is only a slight chance of preventing that from happening – especially when we closely examine the results of the above-mentioned research connected with teachers' approach to disabled people.

Teachers have trouble with the real assessment of the efficiency of integration activities. 78% of teachers describe the inclusive actions in their schools as good whereas 28% of teachers as very good. Yet, at the same time disabled children are isolated and rejected in kindergartens, primary schools and gymnasiums. The research shows that 54% of children attending kindergartens, 46% of pupils from grades I-III of primary schools and 37% of

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<sup>18</sup> The research was carried out among the group of 90 students, 30 students from grades I-III each, from primary schools of Łódź Voivodeship.

students from higher grades and gymnasiums experience isolation. In the analogical system 27, 34 and 29% of students meet with rejection (A. Maciarz, 1999; J. Bąbka, 2003; K. Ćwirynkało, 2003)<sup>19</sup>.

Another strong evidence to show the problem of meeting the needs of mentally disabled students in generally accessible schools is confirmed by the research results of Z. Gajdzica (2003)<sup>20</sup>. It turns out that the inclusion of a mentally disabled child into an ordinary class does not change a thing. The average class size is the same – 26 students (25 in the countryside, 27 in towns). There is no individualization of school curriculum. M. Ogorzałek (2003)<sup>21</sup> discovered that no extra-curricular activities or school subject competitions are provided for mentally disabled students in generally accessible schools. What they receive instead are re-education classes to catch up with their fully-abled peers. Disabled students are also left out of fulfilling particular school and class functions.

It turns out again that the implemented inclusive actions are actually a sham, not genuine efforts taking into account the needs of disabled students.

The research results indicate that the extending of the range of educational services is not synonymous with the meeting of needs, especially those of disabled students. This process is neither easy nor fast. Not only are formal conditions necessary but the ones connected with unethical sphere as well. It takes time to educate teachers, make them change their approach to disabled students, help them open up to getting involved in teaching a student which due to his/her special needs can certainly become a challenge. If teachers find the strength to take up the challenge, they will definitely get a lot of satisfaction. And the harder the task becomes the stronger and deeper their feeling of satisfaction is. I do believe it is possible.

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<sup>19</sup> Macierz, A. *Szanse i zagrożenia rozwoju dzieci niepełnosprawnych w integracyjnych formach kształcenia specjalnego*. [in:] Dykcie, W., Pańczyk, J. (ed.) *Pedagogika specjalna wobec zagrożeń wyzwań XXI wieku*. Wydawnictwo UAM i WSPS, Poznań-Warszawa. 1999. Bąbka, J. *Edukacja integracyjna dzieci pełnosprawnych i niepełnosprawnych. Zagrożenia i rzeczywistość*. Wydawnictwo Fundacji Humaniora, Poznań. 2001. Ćwirynkało, K. *Pozycja socjometryczna uczniów niepełnosprawnych a postawa nauczycieli wobec integracji*. [in:] Kazanowski, Z., Osik-Chudowska, D. (ed.) *Integracja osób niepełnosprawnych w edukacji i integracjach społecznych*. Wydawnictwo UMCS, Lublin. 2003.

<sup>20</sup> Gajdzica, Z. *Wybrane uwarunkowania procesu kształcenia ucznia z lekkim upośledzeniem umysłowym w niższych klasach szkoły podstawowej ogólnodostępnej*. [in:] Kazanowski, Z., Osik-Chudowska, D. (ed.) *Integracja osób niepełnosprawnych w edukacji i integracjach społecznych*. Wydawnictwo UMCS, Lublin. 2003.

<sup>21</sup> Ogorzałek, M. *Warunki kształcenia specjalnego uczniów z upośledzeniem umysłowym w szkołach ogólnodostępnych okresie reformy oświaty*. [in:] Palak, Z. (ed.) *Pedagogika specjalna w reformowanym ustroju edukacyjnym*. Wydawnictwo UMCS, Lublin. 2001.

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### **Streszczenie**

Czas zastanowić się nad sensem, celowością i zasadnością zmian, jakie stały się rzeczywistością polskiej szkoły.

Edukacja w Polsce nie przystaje do nowych warunków charakterystycznych dla społeczeństwa demokratycznego. Podobnie jest w przypadku postępującej autonomii szkół i nauczycieli. Młodzież natomiast, mimo deklaracji animatorów reform, nie wynosi ze szkoły umiejętności, w dalszym ciągu głównym trendem wydaje się hołdowanie encyklopedyzmowi. Brak w szkole nastawienia na kształtowanie zainteresowań i zamiłowań do poszczególnych przedmiotów. W zamian najczęściej fundujemy uczniom nudne zajęcia, stereotypowe,

utrwalone interakcje, szkołę - jako instytucję występującą w stosunku do ucznia z pozycji władzy.