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### **Attitudes towards disability — chance of social acceptance**

In recent years a lot of attention has been devoted to the discussion about the place of the disabled in society, and consequently in education. Many authors point to the drawbacks of the present education system but it is difficult to avoid the impression that there are no constructive attempts at answering the question about how to change this situation. We often wonder which way can lead to the normalization of disabled people's life and what can cause them to be socially accepted. We are all well aware that the process of normalization is long and complicated and that it takes time to change the attitudes of society, both among the disabled and non-disabled, to make it possible to talk about social integration satisfactory to both parties. Research shows that attitudes towards disability are mostly negative, which results from a lot of factors, but at the same time it points to the significant role of educating children and adolescents in order to change these attitudes. A. Sękowski claims that 'attitudes towards the disabled constitute an essential element of social culture, level of civilization and that they serve as an indicator of everyone's maturity of personality. Their formation is connected with personal experience of an individual and the conditions and circumstances in which an individual grows up. Therefore, the attitude issues are particularly important when integration is not just a slogan but when it becomes more and more often everyday reality'<sup>1</sup>.

As J. Kossewska says the factors responsible for social attitudes towards disabled people can be arranged in the form of a hierarchical structure whose elements are closely dependent on each other. The structure is made up of:

- **macrosystem** (the socially accepted ideological system within a given society, the system also resulting from intergenerational culture transmission),

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<sup>1</sup> Sękowski A., *Tendencje integracyjne a postawy wobec osób niepełnosprawnych*. [in:] Palak, Z. ( ed. ) *Pedagogika specjalna w reformowanym ustroju edukacyjnym*, Lublin, 2001. p. 136.

- **mezosystem** (the factors connected with the personality and functioning of non-disabled persons),
- **microsystem** (the factors connected with the functioning of a disabled person)<sup>2</sup>.

The above model is reflected in the underlying principles of integrated teaching whose aim is, among other things, to bring together disabled and fully-abled students in both school and extraschool education. Therefore, it would seem as if integrated schools have the appropriate conditions for the implementation of actions geared to modifying students' attitudes towards disability. According to A. Sękowski the actions to be undertaken are to:

- develop social skills of disabled students,
- enable personal contact and provide the knowledge about disability,
- form small groups of extraschool character in which students may get to know each other during play and other activities,
- organize school work in small groups of integrating character<sup>3</sup>.

Hitherto research (eg.: Maciarz 1999, Bąbka 2001, Janiszewska-Nieścioruk 1999, et al.) demonstrates that disabled students from integrated classes occupy unfavourable social roles. Yet, on the other hand, the research into the attitudes of fully-abled students proves that the knowledge about disability together with contact with their disabled peers prompt a change in their perception of a disabled person and foster their mutual relations (eg.: Oszustowicz 1995).

That is why the subject of the research presented below is the correlation between the declared attitudes towards disabled peers and the form of teaching (integrated school, generally accessible ordinary school) at the educational stage of gymnasium and also an attempt at answering the question if and how much these attitudes change with age.

The research covered 192 fully-abled students taught in the following schools: an integrated school (97 students) and an ordinary school (95) from Łódź Voivodeship<sup>4</sup>. Its aim was to define the attitudes of gymnasium students towards the disabled. The research was carried out with the use of reliable and well-chosen tools such as the A. Sękowski scale for the assessment of attitudes towards disabled people and K. Skarżyńska scale of the assessment of attitudes towards people with locomotor disability, hearing disorders, sight disorders, mental

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<sup>2</sup> Kossewska J., *Uwarunkowania postaw : nauczyciele i inne grupy zawodowe wobec integracji szkolnej dzieci niepełnosprawnych*, Kraków 2000. p.101.

<sup>3</sup> Sękowski A., *Tendencje integracyjne a postawy wobec osób niepełnosprawnych*, w Z. Palak (red.), *Pedagogika specjalna w reformowanym ustroju edukacyjnym*, Lublin, 2001. p. 143.

<sup>4</sup> The research was done by G. Watała for M.A. seminar conducted by the author.

disability and behaviour disorders. The results obtained from the research served as indicators showing the advantages of integrated education to the development of socially desired attitudes or their deficiencies.

It was expected that the collected data would help answer the following questions:

1. What are the differences, if any, between the attitudes of integrated and ordinary gymnasium students towards disabled people?
2. Are there any differences between the attitudes of students from classes I and III of integrated gymnasium?
3. Does the kind of school affect the attitudes towards people with locomotor disability, hearing disorders, sight disorders, mental disability and behaviour disability?

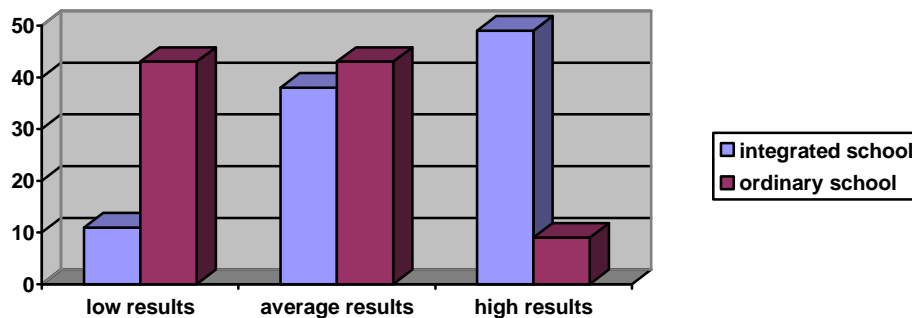
### **The research results**

The research findings proved the assumption that the inclusion of disabled students in the mainstream teaching promotes a more positive disposition towards people with development disorders. A much larger number of integrated schools students received high scores in the declared attitudes towards disabled persons than their friends from ordinary schools. Even if we consider that these are just declared attitudes which may not be reflected in their behaviour towards and full acceptance of their disabled peers, it must be noted that by learning together they gain deeper knowledge, better understanding and finally, better perception of disabled persons. Not wanting to idealize the effectiveness of integrated education, whose deficiencies are already fully analyzed in literature, it is nevertheless obvious that after several years of integrated schooling, fully-abled young people are much more open to the problems of their disabled peers, which in the future may result in their greater acceptance of disability in adult life. Such considerable differences in the scores between students may definitely be related to the kind of young people who are taught in integrated education system. It may well be that among the students of integrated classes (in gymnasiums) are more students who have some previous experience in social interactions with disabled people or the students who accept a priori that learning and functioning in a diverse group like an integrated class is something natural. The above-mentioned conclusions are also substantiated by the results of the research done into the role of personality in the process of the formation of the discussed attitudes<sup>5</sup>.

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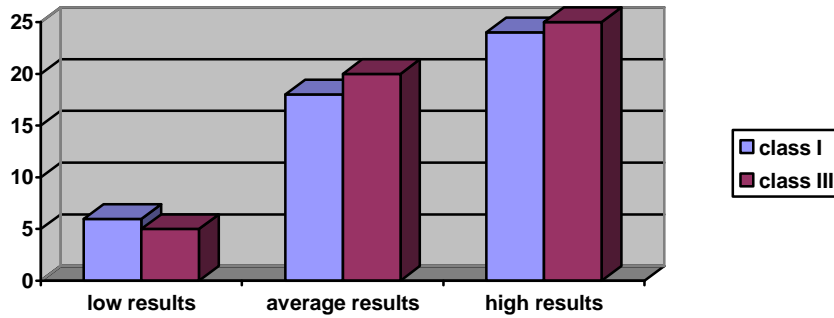
<sup>5</sup> Sękowski A., *Tendencje integracyjne a postawy wobec osób niepełnosprawnych*, [in:] Palak, Z. (ed.), *Pedagogika specjalna w reformowanym ustroju edukacyjnym*, Lublin 2001.

Figure 1. Attitudes of integrated and ordinary gymnasium towards disabled people



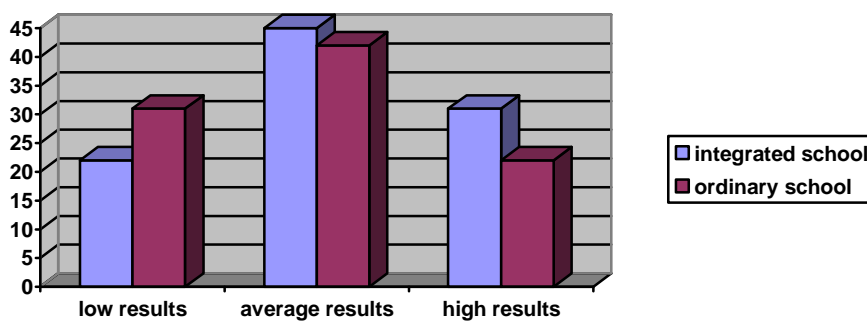
One should bear in mind that a every important question arises as far as integrated education planning is concerned, namely to what extent a 3-year period of education affects changes in young people's attitudes towards their disabled peers. Surprisingly, the research results presented below (Figure 2) show that there are no statistically significant changes between the declared attitudes of students from classes I and III of integrated gymnasium. It must be noted, however, that in both groups virtually half of the respondents obtained high results. And yet, it might seem that gymnasium students become more and more aware of the possibilities and limitations connected with disability and thanks to gradual familiarization with disabled persons the positive attitudes towards them will be prevalent.

Figure 2. The attitudes towards disabled people of students from I and III classes of integrated gymnasium



It is worth mentioning that the respondents were also asked about their attitude to particular groups of disabled persons. The research findings indicated statistically significant differences in the attitudes towards people with motor disability, sight and hearing disorders declared by both integrated and ordinary gymnasium students. Of the two student groups, the former would definitely be more often favourably disposed to co-operation and social interactions with their peers with special educational needs. However, as regards students' attitude to people with mental disability and behaviour disorders, the findings were similar for both groups of respondents. In this case, the form of education did not have any influence on the acceptance of the peers with the above-mentioned difficulties. Yet, it must be noted that it was young people with behaviour problems that received the lowest social acceptance in the whole assessed population. The findings confirm that mentally disabled persons have a worse position in social group and they might result from the fact that it is less common to meet students with mental disability in the third stage of integrated education.

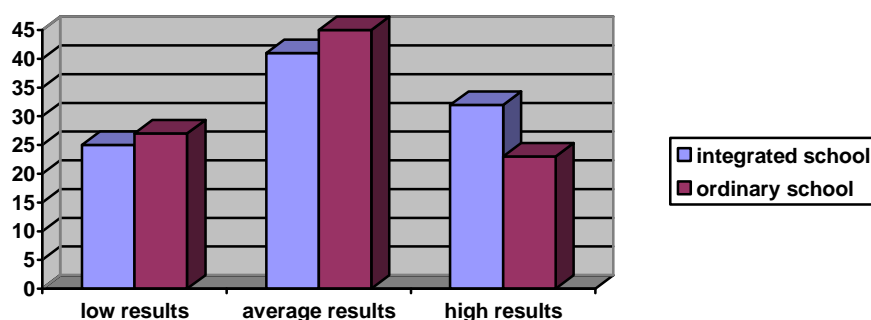
*Figure 3. The attitudes of integrated and ordinary gymnasium students towards mentally disabled people*



As mentioned earlier, the lowest mean score of the assessed population (22.5 points as opposed to 30 points for the rest of disabilities) was the score for the attitudes towards people suffering from behaviour disorders. On the one hand, one cannot be surprised with these findings considering the fact that the essential quality influencing the attitudes towards disabled persons are their social skills which either help or prevent their social interactions. On the other hand, however, the fact that educational institutions do not offer enough effective therapeutic activities that could support and help students with behaviour problems is no doubt causing concern. That the problem is serious and needs immediate attention is reflected in the present debate connected with ‘the programme for schools under special pedagogical control’. Worryingly, the transferring of the so-called ‘difficult students’ from ordinary schools to schools ‘specially’ prepared to work with them is not very likely to improve their social interactions and contribute to their fuller acceptance.

Instead of establishing new institutions, action should be taken to create a system which will help deal effectively with the issue of ‘problem students’ in their present educational environment. Schools need to be given extra support to be able to cope with educational and upbringing work. Teachers should be provided with knowledge about other action methods, preventative ones included, about therapy and kinds of support services in the place of residence which can cause that the transferring of students with behaviour disorders to a special institution will be regarded as a last resort<sup>6</sup>.

Figure 4. The attitudes of integrated and ordinary gymnasium students towards people with behaviour disorders



## Conclusions

<sup>6</sup> Pyżalski, J. *Wyrzucić zgnite jabłko, czyli pomysł na niezdyscyplinowanych uczniów*. Łódź, 2006, <http://www.gazeta.edu.pl/portal.php?cat=29&article=3&c=29> ( 29. 09.2006 ).

The research results presented above lead to the following conclusions:

- integrated education has a positive influence upon the formation of attitudes towards the disabled (cf. Oszustowicz 1995, Miller, Roth 1993)<sup>7</sup>,
- the frequency of social interactions with disabled people is related to the opinions on and the declared attitudes towards them,
- when planning integrated education, special attention should be given to the issues connected with the formation of attitudes towards people with mental disability and behaviour disorders,
- teaching young people in generally accessible ordinary schools should involve broadening their knowledge about disability and taking support actions for greater acceptance of disabled people (for the research findings suggest the actions which have been undertaken so far prove insufficient, and so do social campaigns),
- the people who are administratively or professionally responsible for disabled people ought to fulfil this responsibility and be not afraid that disabled students' participation in school life can cause difficulties and complicate the functioning of the rest of school community<sup>8</sup>.

To sum up, despite the imperfections of integrated education system it is possible that well-thought-out educational activity will help 'form positive attitudes towards disabled persons, which in turn, opens up the possibilities of more extensive and fuller social and individual functioning of fully-abled people and can foster the attitude of openness, or better still solidarity with disabled people'<sup>9</sup>, and consequently, in the future, lead to the fuller acceptance and normalization in social life of those people.

## References

1. Kossewska, J., *Uwarunkowania postaw : nauczyciele i inne grupy zawodowe wobec integracji szkolnej dzieci niepełnosprawnych*, Kraków 2000.
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<sup>7</sup> Kossewska J., *Uwarunkowania postaw : nauczyciele i inne grupy zawodowe wobec integracji szkolnej dzieci niepełnosprawnych*. Kraków 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Wyczesany J., *Wartości jako źródło poglądów młodzieży na temat osób niepełnosprawnych*, Conspect nr 10, Kraków 2002.

<sup>9</sup> Sękowski A., *Tendencje integracyjne a postawy wobec osób niepełnosprawnych*, [in:] Palak, Z. (ed.), *Pedagogika specjalna w reformowanym ustroju edukacyjnym*, Lublin 2001, pp.144-145.

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