

Between adaptation and emancipation - the awkward dichotomy of pedagogy

Diverse structures and institutions of the social system are to a significant extent shaped by the signifying practices for various phenomena and the categories of individuals. One such social category, created within the cultural and pedagogic discourse, is disability and the disabled - the subject matter of special pedagogy.

Disability, in view of contemporary definitions, is a process of “becoming disabled”, between the very moment of biological impairment and the consequential changes in relationship with the environment¹. This approach highlights the adaptational character of the relationship between an individual and its environment, and identifies the essence of disability as the interaction between the individual traits of a disabled individual and the existential niche this person lives in². This, in turn, entails a certain approach in pedagogy, which postulates that appropriate support of a disabled person's development and relevant changes in the environment can let them enter the social sphere and adapt to “normalized” life as part of the community.

The category of physical or mental disability may also be perceived as a kind of construct and “social fact”, to which certain meanings are assigned; meanings which reveal social values and attitudes towards the disabled. Disability may be thus understood in a wider context - as a culturally and socially induced process of creating and experiencing the meanings of one's own disability. The daily life of the disabled may hence be treated as “a struggle for meanings and definitions of disability”, alternative to those prevailing in society³.

The discourse of the special pedagogy defines the goals of special education as supporting personal development, normalizing conditions of living, and creating opportunities for the best possible adaptation to universally accepted structures and social roles. In recent decades, this has

¹ See: Cz. Kosakowski, *Multidimensionality of abnormality* (in Polish), *Wychowanie na co Dzień*, 1996, issues 10-11, pp. 24-26; Cz. Kosakowski, *Human disability – the change in perspective* (in Polish), „*Ars Educandi*”, volume 3, Gdańsk 2003, UG publishings.; T. Gałkowski, *Definition of a 'disabled person' – european experiences* (in Polish) „*Problemy Rehabilitacji Społecznej i Zawodowej*”, 1997, nr 3, pp. 29-34.; T. Majewski, *Psychosocial idea of disability* (in Polish), *Szkoła Specjalna*, 1999, nr 3, pp. 131-135; A. Krause, *Integrationary illusions of the postmodernity. The situation of the disabled* (in Polish), Kraków 2000, Impuls.

² A. Gustavsson and E. Zakrzewska-Manterys, *Introduction to the social context of disability*. (In Polish) in: *Disability in the social mirror* (in Polish), ed. A. Gustavsson and E. Zakrzewska-Manterys, Warsaw 1997, Żak

³ See: A. Gustavsson and E. Zakrzewska-Manterys, *ibid.*

been best reflected by the idea of educational and social integration of the disabled⁴. The reason for this adaptational approach (and a self-fulfilling prophecy at the same time), implemented in educational practice, is a notion that the disabled are not able and not competent enough to participate in social life. This well established belief, both in society and the scientific world, ascribes a certain odium of abnormality to the disabled – “otherness”, understood as a certain kind of deficiency.

The adaptational and assimilatory tendencies towards the disabled may be associated with the phenomenon of *ableism*, a deep-rooted process of devaluating disability in society. *Ableism* may result in a thoughtless acceptance of a notion that “it is better to walk than crawl, speak than sign, read print rather than Braille, speak on our own rather than with somebody's help”⁵. This stance is exemplified by a remark from J. Watson that “finding bright sides to disability is like praising the advantages of extreme poverty”⁶. The consequence of such thinking is a conviction that disability is a negative state which should be treated and eliminated. The acceptance of the disabled is possible only if they try to be like us, or are even better than us (we accept them when they are capable of “performing the impossible”).

Pedagogic relationships, created in the area of “adaptational rationality” (a term coined by R. Kwaśnica), tend to search for a clear picture of our world. In the social sphere, this picture is influenced mainly by the “hierarchy of action”, which requires effectiveness of action based on pragmatic and utilitarian knowledge⁷. To put it into the language of direct interpersonal relations, as mentioned by H.G. Gadamer, the meeting of a teacher and a student (as a conversation, dialogue, encounter of two worlds) intrinsically entails a danger of a lack of true listening and the danger of “half-dead” dialogues in which the relation with another man is based on a patronizing claim of knowing and understanding our interlocutor better than he ever will. This type of relation, expressing the pedagogic ‘dialectic of care’, exhibits a desire to dominate the other person, and delegitimize any claims of his own⁸.

⁴ W. Dykcik, *Introduction to special education as a science* (in Polish), Pedagogika specjalna, ed. W. Dykcik, Poznań 1997, UAM.; W. Dykcik, *The scope and the subject matter of special education*, (in Polish) *ibid.*, Wyd. Naukowe UAM.; A. Krause, op. cit., A. Krause, *Normalization as a paradigm of thinking and action in special education* (in Polish), in: *Normalization of the environments of the disabled* (in Polish), series: *Discourses of the special education*, ed. Cz. Kosakowski and A. Krause, Olsztyn 2005, UWM.

⁵ T. Hehir, *Eliminating Ableism In Education*, Harvard Educational Review, 2002, Vol. 72, No. 1, pp. 1-32.

⁶ W. Mikołuszko, *The rebellion of the disabled. What have the achievements in medicine and genetics given us?* Gazeta Wyborcza, 16 September 2003, p. 12.

⁷ R. Kwaśnica, *Two rationalities. From the philosophy of sense to general education* Wrocław 2007, DSWE TWP and R. Kwaśnica, *Towards the dialog in the education* (In Polish), *Alternative education – the theoretical dilemmas* (in Polish), ed. by B. Śliwerski, Łódź-Kraków 1995, Impuls.

⁸ H.-G. Gadamer, *Inability to talk*, *Znak*, 1980, issue 3, pp. 369-376, and H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and method. The*

We could risk a statement that the aspirations to "normalize" the disabled, implemented in the name of inclusiveness and integration, and meant as a kind of tool to normalize their lives, may be perceived as an aspiration (as in any other pedagogical relation) to create a homogenic society, in which everyone will function according to similar and unquestioned rules, universally recognized as normal. Seemingly neutral terms connected with the notion of social integration and normalization of the lives of the disabled,⁹ which usually mean adaptation to the cultural standards of a "normal life", conceal ideological notions. For how can we define a normal life? What indicates such life? Which manifestations of human existence fulfill the criteria of normality and which do not? There is no unequivocal answer to these crucial sociological and philosophical questions. A usual answer is that to live normally is to live like us (the "fully fit" majority), act like us, speak like us, and generally do what everybody does. In this case, the category of "normal life" depends on a certain cultural standard of activity, characteristic of a lifestyle preferred in a given culture. Meanings and values involved in such notions often result in a firm conviction that such projects ensure a happy and satisfying life for the disabled. For our part, we, the society, should try to adjust the structures and conditions of their lives, so that they can emulate our model through "active participation".

Here, we may rather somewhat "perversely" argue that each person has a right not only to a normal life, but also to a life according to one's conscience and limitations, a right to *be different*, and a right to implement one's own cultural projects of existence, including those alternative to the mainstream model. This "distinctness" does not have to entail fundamental otherness and strangeness, perceived as a negative difference compared to normality. In this context, the notion of emancipation in the area of pedagogy and special pedagogy (leaving aside any attempts at a "scientific" definition) would mean abandoning the perception and expression of reality in the structural paradigm which constructs a certain and objective knowledge about the world, and divides the world into dual categories of true/false, good/bad, norm/pathology, right/wrong, putting these notions in a somewhat ontological position. By no means does such an approach mean, as some might suppose, a dangerous relativity of values and moral norms, potentially dangerous to the social order. It entails creating a space for different perspectives and meanings, where each local perspective of the world and each understanding of one's own participation in this world can be expressed, and, most importantly, heard and listened to.

introduction to philosophical hermeneutics (Polish translation by B. Baran), Kraków 1993, inter esse.

⁹ I would like to stress here, that I do not see the normalization as a process of 'adjusting their personal characteristics to the norms and standards of normal people' (the danger of such an interpretation is shown by A.Krausse, 2000, op.cit. p.22), but the one according to B.Mikkelsen, 'an aspiration to enable normal life for each disabled person, as widely as possible [quotation after A.Krause, op.cit. p 23].

Nowadays, such understanding of cognitive and social fundamentals of emancipation is presented by post-structuralism. This way of thinking, to use a gross oversimplification, understands social life as a field of struggle between various discourses; in other words – a struggle between diverse representations and interpretations of reality. According to Z. Melosik,¹⁰ poststructuralist perspective offers an alternative approach to the question of identity construction and moves the focus from the transmission of ready-made patterns for shaping and transforming individuals, to the presentation of various possibilities and limitations, legitimized by the actual experiences of individual people. Local and contextualized character of this discourse enables the emancipation of diverse groups, providing them with space for new alternative meanings beyond the prevailing interpretation of the world.

Emancipatory rationality (coming back to the idea of R. Kwaśnica) concentrates on personal rather than utilitarian values. It does not perceive reality as a finite structure which may be cognized and perfected, and therefore we may not resolve anything in a certain and definitive fashion. In emancipatory thinking an ongoing search is a fundamental value and the principle of human existence. According to Kwaśnica, both types of rationality, emancipatory and adaptational, are always present in the human experience as theoretical constructs (Webber-esque ideal types), which come to the forefront depending on the context (social, cultural and historical)¹¹.

If we acknowledge that emancipation has a certain value and should be included in the area of education and social life, then an awkward question arises for special education teachers. How, if at all, shall we implement the idea of emancipation of the disabled, people which we should support in the first place? Would it not entail for them the realization of their oppression and social exclusion first, and only then the emancipation from these? Posing such questions itself, the questions which are purposefully exaggerated, makes us aware that asking how and who we should emancipate puts us in the sphere of instrumental rationality, since we ask for means and ways of adaptation to some conceived “emancipation project” to be implemented.

Preparing ourselves for emancipation, “learning” it (if such term can be used at all, even in inverted commas) may be thus realized only in the attempts of creating cognitive and social space for coexistence, within the context of education, interpersonal relations and institutions. This space, according to A. Szahaj, would have a character of a constructive community, for which internal diversity is both a virtue and value; its shape and borders always being a matter of negotiations, compromise, choice, conscious acceptance, and obtained approval. In this community “*closeness is*

¹⁰ Z. Melosik, *Post-structuralist education: how to live in the world with no capital letters?* in: *Alternative education – theoretical dilemmas* (in Polish), ed. B. Śliwerski, Łódź-Kraków 1995, Impuls.

¹¹ See R. Kwaśnica, *ibid.*

not a necessity, and distance does not have to mean alienation”¹².

¹² A. Szahaj, *What community?* and a lecture *Loneliness and community* (6th conference of the Polish Psychological Society, <http://zjazd.pedagog.UMCS.lublin.pl/wspolnota.pdf> downloaded on 15th July 2007) presented during the 6th conference of the Polish Psychological Society, 17th September 2007.

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