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### **The nature of special education – the transformation of theoretical models in the field**

The paper deals with special education understood as academic discipline, i.e. discipline of first and foremost theoretical nature, aiming at the scientific description and explanation of the phenomenon of special education, as needed by the people. The questions concerning the transformation of theoretical models in special education form the basis for all questions concerning special education needs as such. Content reflection outweighs methodological reflection, which means that all the remarks made in the paper are informed by the theoretical, rather than methodological, perspective. The explanation is understood broadly here – as a general quality of science (here: special education), as opposed to its narrow understanding in natural sciences (the narrower understanding of scientific explanation depicts the idea of W. Dittely, who held that nature is explained, culture is understood, while the human world is interpreted). The reflections on the nature of special education will embrace the content and the functional significance of this science. In terms of the content, science is understood as a body of theories concerning a given domain and fulfilling the methodological conditions with reference to the precision of concepts and to the justification of postulates, etc. In the functional understanding, science involves the activities leading to theory construction (the so-called context of discovering) and theory verification and justification (context of justification).<sup>1</sup>

#### **Content approach to explanation in the field of special education**

The nature of special education is embedded in the fact that it is multi-contextual and interdisciplinary – as emphasized by W. Dykcik.<sup>2</sup> One needs to bear in mind, however,

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. K. Jodkowski, *Filozofia nauki XX wieku*, In: L. Gawor and Z. Stachowski (Eds.), *Filozofia współczesna*. Bydgoszcz – Warszawa – Lublin, 2006, p.236.

<sup>2</sup> W. Dykcik, *Komplementarność i interdyscyplinarność jako paradygmaty naukowego rozwoju pedagogiki specjalnej* In: E. Milewska and B. Śliwowski (Eds.) *Pedagogika i edukacja wobec nowych*

that this nature manifested itself gradually, as the subsequent scientific models were changing, which was predicted by Th. Kuhn in his theory of paradigmatic change.<sup>3</sup>

The structure of a paradigm can be compared to the construction of the theory tree, the root of which is the initial theory. According to natural sciences, the construction of a theory starts with the basic model (i.e. the maximally simplified one), which embraces a group of mutually interconnected idealized ideas, thereby showing what is regarded at a given time as a system of basic relationships in the observed phenomena. These assumptions are subsequently rejected, and the initial model is broadened and concretized, embracing more and more of the abundance of the phenomena, and informing better and better on the registered facts. A series of concretized models, stemming from a basic model, is referred to as a model theory. Usually, a dominant model theory cannot account for all known facts. Then it undergoes correction. New theories are constructed, which correspond to the initial one, and still new ones, which correspond to the theories which corresponded to the initial one. This is exactly the process which can be compared to the construction of a theory tree, its root being the initial theory. The relationship of correspondence to a given theory does not reach beyond the paradigm which this theory initiated (new theories better and better complement the repertoire of inessential factors). The theory which refutes the present paradigm prioritizes the factors previously unknown; in this sense, it rejects the older way of seeing the 'gist' of the studied phenomena. In some respect, however, it does continue the old paradigm. Next, this theory is subject to corrections, too, and this is how a new theory tree which corresponds to it is created, i.e. a new paradigm. According to Th. Kuhn, a paradigmatic change is similar to a political coup, and a mature science consists of intertwining periods of normality and revolution.

Referring to the paradigmatic model of the development of science, it is worth mentioning that no one is in the position to independently construct a paradigm – it is only a paradigm-initiating theory that can be constructed independently. This explains the

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wspólnot i różnic w jednoczącej się Europie. Materiały z IV Ogólnopolskiego Zjazdu Pedagogicznego. Kraków, 2002, pp.429-432.

<sup>3</sup>Th. Kuhn, *Struktura rewolucji naukowych*, Warszawa 1968.

significance of the so-called academic circles, consisting of the ‘founding father’, the elite of verifiers (who build theories which correspond to the given one, as well as question the completeness of theories or the correctness of the models derived from these theories), and of the rank and file practitioners (who do not question the theory at any point, but rather use the theory to answer new questions, which so-far remained unasked in the context of the theory).<sup>4</sup>

In the field of special education it is the easiest to establish the persons of the ‘founding fathers’ with reference to the early time of special education. As it is normally acknowledged, the beginning of special education as a separate academic discipline dates back to when H. Hanselmann established the department of remedial education in Zurich in 1931, which is considered the first one in the Western countries. Consequently, the time following this fact will be subject to the analysis, while special attention will be paid to the Polish context.<sup>5</sup> It needs to be pointed out that in the department of remedial education in Zurich, when it was chaired by H. Hanselmann, the research focused on medical aspects of disorders, but as H. Hanselmann was replaced by P. Moor, the focus shifted from the model based on the psychopathology of a child to the model based on child’s needs, individuality and conditions favoring his optimal development.<sup>6</sup> In Poland, M. Grzegorzewska expanded the basic model in the biological, psychological and social dimensions, which she used to elaborate on the inseparateness of the neurophysiological and psycho-social processes of man.

The paradigm oriented on the child’s individuality (later also adult’s) was developing into a set of assumptions and rules concerning the rehabilitative relationship, and its most important development was the shift from thinking in terms of ‘subject – object’ to thinking in terms of ‘you and I’ as two sovereign subjects. From the ‘subject’ and

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<sup>4</sup> Nowak, L. O ukrytej jedności nauk społecznych i nauk przyrodniczych, <http://www.staff.amu.edu.pl/~epistemo/Nowak/koncepcje.htm>, retrieved 10<sup>th</sup> August 2007.

<sup>5</sup> The problems of paradigms in the special education in Poland has been recently addressed by M. Kupisiewicz, but her focus is on the practice of special education. M. Kupisiewicz, *Paradygmaty pedagogiki specjalnej – główne kierunki w Polsce w ostatnim trzydziestoleciu.*, Człowiek – Niepełnosprawność – Społeczeństwo. 2006, no 2.

<sup>6</sup> W. Ziedler, *Przedmowa do wydania polskiego*, In: O. Speck, *Niepełnosprawni w społeczeństwie. Podstawy ortopedagogiki*, Gdańsk, 2005, pp.14-15.

'relationship' categories grew the branches concentrated around autonomy and self-sufficiency, aspiring to the role of a competing paradigm. This occurred with a considerable contribution of I. Obuchowska, and her work on autonomy and auto-rehabilitation.<sup>7</sup> New branches were connecting with the branches of other trees, grew over the years. The assumptions and rules were concretized with relation to various educational contexts (usually the contexts of institutional care, such as the school) and various types of disability. The theory refuting this view was the theory of common, unique qualities of the disabled and the healthy, advocated by A. Hulek, a theory which does not seem to have been properly appreciated in science.<sup>8</sup>

In the 1970s., a paradigm oriented on the broadly understood environment appeared and began to compete with the one oriented on child's individuality and the institutional care. The theory which initiated this paradigm, and at the same time refuted the theory of the special environment, was the concept of normalization, the bases of which, outlined in the USA by W. Wolfensberger<sup>9</sup> and then presented in detail by B. Nirje, referred to the material dimensions of life of the people mentally disabled. This theory gradually developed and was enriched with such notions as autonomy, the social responsibility towards the disabled, and the presence of the disabled in the social context. The branches of the tree were more and more focusing on the non-material conditions of human life, and embraced people with various types of disability.

Today one can better and better observe that the explanations in the field of special education derive from the ecological paradigm. The linear causality has been replaced by the circular causality, which means that the reflections concern a series of feedback impacts, with both the distinguishing and the holistic qualities being taken into consideration. One needs to bear in mind, too, that a need for a new paradigm is not a simple ambition of an excessively original author, but it grows out of the fact that the

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<sup>7</sup> I. Obuchowska, O autonomii w wychowaniu niepełnosprawnych dzieci i młodzieży, in: W. Dykcik (Ed.), *Społeczeństwo wobec autonomii osób niepełnosprawnych*, Poznań, 1996.

<sup>8</sup> A. Hulek, *Wspólne i swoiste zagadnienia w rewalidacji różnych grup osób z odchyleniami od normy*, in: A. Hulek (Ed.), *Pedagogika rewalidacyjna*, Warszawa, 1977.

<sup>9</sup> W. Wolfensberger, *National Institute on Mental Retardation*, Toronto, 1972.

existing theories cannot account for the facts within the assumed perspective – thus, it is a scientific need. In the ecological approach, the central component is the active subject, participating in his own development, exerting influence on his environment and remaining in a constant reciprocal relationship with this environment. The frameworks of this paradigm enable to see the man in the semantic relationship with the world, i.e. in the relationship which is beyond the comprehension of natural sciences. The stance of the researcher as an ‘ideal observer’ is not sufficient, either.

The path of explanations with increasing distinctiveness touches upon the complexity of the world, while the results obtained in other fields serve as assumptions to initiate own research in the field of special education, as data verifying or falsifying own views, or as data accounting for the phenomena under study. It is in its cooperation with other sciences that the interdisciplinary nature of special education manifests itself.

The reflections on the content approach to special education can be concluded with a word of criticism concerning the theories in the field. One can observe a dispersion of knowledge into sub-disciplines, sections and domains; the lack of mechanisms for cumulating knowledge in the form of theory synthesis<sup>10</sup>, and the lack of clear distinction between the cognitive (new ideas, descriptions, explanations) and the evaluative.<sup>11</sup> It is indeed unbelievable that in spite of the multi-tracked theoretical thinking, dispersion or even inconsistencies between particular theoretical orientations, special education does constitute one academic discipline. Perhaps the hope to synthesize theories need to be abandoned for the sake of the idea of special education as a multitude of disciplines, joined by shared interest in the human in the context of special education and rehabilitation?

One needs to note that special education is nowadays struggling to specify its own research population. In the light of contemporary stances in the field of special education, it seems more appropriate to use the categories referring to the relationship between the

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<sup>10</sup> W. Dykcik, *Komplementarność...*, op.cit. p.429.

<sup>11</sup> I. Obuchowska, *Dylematy pedagogiki specjalnej*, *Kwartalnik Pedagogiczny*, 1984, No 4, p.3.

subject and the environment (e.g. educational disability, special educational needs)<sup>12</sup>, rather than the category of a 'disabled person'. This is because the former authorize the range and content of special education activities, as well as they more precisely depict not only what makes special education a unique discipline, but also what is regarded, unfortunately only temporarily, as basic relationships within the educational and social systems.

### **Functional approach to explanation in the field of special education**

The historic, social and cultural context in which educational phenomena are embedded is the reason why in special education, probably more so than in any other field, findings lead to more or less satisfactory conclusions, which often, after some time, need to be revised. The time variable manifests itself in the philosophical-cultural context of academic activity, and corresponds to a mentality of a given epoch. Its significance is evident both in the methodology of scientific endeavor and in the ways in which the researchers interpret various aspects of human life, including education. Significantly enough, special education has been changing its theoretical orientation, depending on human rights social movements and social or even political changes. The Maria Grzegorzewska academic school was strongly connected to the exterritorial areas which the society left to the disposal of special education. On these areas, with the discovered truths and knowledge, she would corroborate the views and interests of the healthy, in whose interest she was actually working. These were, after all, possible functions of limiting the content nearly completely to closed institutions (especially schools) and placing strong emphasis on professional help. For the representatives of special education it must be an important lesson to learn – the one that teaches to remain distanced to the sense of self-righteousness. Otherwise, one is only a step away from doing academic work in the persuasive mode, where promoting given ideals and educational behaviors is more important than the knowledge of real factors and conditions of education, their reasons, effects, potential and limitations.

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<sup>12</sup> O. Speck, *Niepełnosprawni w społeczeństwie. Podstawy ortopedagogiki*, Gdańsk 2005, p.259-266; G. Szumski, *Integracyjne kształcenie niepełnosprawnych*, Warszawa 2006, p.110-113.

It has been mentioned that the out-of-institutional influences were not at first appreciated by science. At the same time the concept of dynamization by Maria Grzegorzewska was left unnoticed, too. The concept was revived only later, in the form of autonomy and self-sufficiency. The emphasis placed on compensation, corrective activities and activation blazed the trail for the theory concerning different forms of disability. Considering the fact that the theory of common and unique qualities of the disabled was not appreciated by science, either, one can conclude that the postulate of P.K. Feyerabend<sup>13</sup> to help the least respected alternative is rather disrespected in the field of special education. Enhancing the build-up of the least popular paradigms is vital, since their explanatory power may be significant. Following the mightiest does not always serve science best.

An important and common aspect of science is the competition between theories. In accordance with the methodological model of natural sciences, the theory which offers most detailed explanations is superior to the other theories; this is a condition which needs to be fulfilled in the inter-paradigmatic transfer. Not infrequently, in the case of special education, is it difficult to decide which theory is superior. It seems that the Popper's<sup>14</sup> postulate to set all scientific theories against all known empirical facts and to reveal all the inconsistencies is rather ignored in special education. This may result from the fact that the existing research in the field is often conducted on limited populations and leads to partial explanations, whose dispersion, as well as frequently varying methodological orientations, make comparing results rather challenging.

### **Final remarks**

Progress in special education, like in any other field, is possible through collective effort. As long as the explanations provided in special education give rise to vivid content discussions, we will enjoy discoveries which will result in subsequent discoveries. Beside the postulates of Th. Popper and P.K. Feyerabend, one needs to mention the postulate of co-thinking by T.A.F. Kuipers, the postulate of tolerance by P.K. Feyerabend, the postulate of interpretative benevolence by K. Ajdukiewicz, and the postulate of clarity by

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<sup>13</sup> P.K. Feyerabend, *Jak być dobrym empirystą* Warszawa 1979.

<sup>14</sup> K.R. Popper, *Logika odkrycia naukowego*, Warszawa, 1977.

K. Twardowski.<sup>15</sup> It is especially the last ones which seem important in the light of recent terminological debates in special education. Terminological confusion observed in contemporary science, which stems among others from the collapse of the modernist style of intellectual pursuit, evokes in some devoted researchers not only a nostalgia for terminological precision and unambiguous content, but open criticism, as well.<sup>16</sup> Should we come to terms with the fact that the historic evolution of meanings, and, what follows, the parallel evolution of lexis used to describe and explain the reality, and acknowledge that this is an inherent part of special education and other social sciences? In this context one may quote P.K. Feyereabend's<sup>17</sup> reflection on irrationality of the condition of unchangeability of meanings: "Excessive preoccupation with meanings may lead to dogmatism and infertility. Susceptibility to change, or even semantic sloppiness, is an initial condition of scientific development."

The reflections above reveal certain dramatics of scientific explanation in special education, which can be connected to the limited autonomy of this field of other fields and to out-of-science influences (state, ideological), as well as to the interests and temptations to which the people working within the fields of special education succumb. The hardships of completing this paper did not disperse my doubts concerning the theoretical status of special education, but it rather strengthened me in my conviction that numerous definitions within the field show it not as it is, but as we wish it to be. This was, however, an important path for me as a researcher – a path of reaching a more advanced self-consciousness of what is being done and why.

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<sup>15</sup> K. Twardowski, *Wybrane filma filozoficzne*, Warszawa 1969.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. J. Pańczyk, *Terminologia w pedagogice specjalnej*, in: J. Pańczyk (Ed.), *Forum Pedagogów XXI wieku*, Tom I, Łódź 2002, p.65-67.; J. Pańczyk, *Upośledzenie umysłowe czy niepełnosprawność intelektualna*, in: J. Pańczyk (Ed.) *Forum Pedagogów XXI wieku*, Tom VII, Łódź 2006, p.65-66.

<sup>17</sup> P.K. Feyereabend, *Jak być...*, op.cit, p.50.

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