

Classroom space as a place of integration

The categories of place and space can be viewed in the perspective of many scientific disciplines. They have also been the subject matter of pedagogical works¹. However, in special pedagogy, place and space seem to be neglected categories, especially in the field of integrated education. This appears surprising as both categories have considerable significance in the organization of the integrated form of education, which I intend to indicate in the further part of this work.

The article aims mainly at presenting and discussing the models of the location of the disabled pupils in the classroom (prepared on the basis of classroom observation) and indicating the frequency of their application in the aspect of particular developmental disorders.

The presented study consists of several parts. Apart from the introduction, it contains an outline of space issues, the characteristics of the conducted research, the description of selected models and the data concerning the frequencies of their application (with an attempt to interpret them). The whole is followed by final conclusions.

On place and space

The notion of space is ambiguous. It can also be associated with numerous terms of close meaning, sometimes incorrectly used interchangeably. These are: place, territory, horizon, homeland, room, field, zone.

The notion of space has very rich connotations. It can be considered as: an abstract idea (mathematical dimension); a characteristic of the solid (physical dimension); a natural environment shaped in a certain way in the course of evolution (natural, geographical

¹ B. Dymara, *Przestrzenie szkoły i przestrzenie życia, czyli trzy światy dziecka / School space and life space or the three worlds of the child/*, [in:] B. Dymara (ed.), *Dziecko w świecie szkoły /The Child in the School World/*, Kraków 1998; H. Kwiatkowska, *Czas, miejsce, przestrzeń – zaniedbane kategorie pedagogiczne /Time, place, space – neglected pedagogical categories/* [in:] A. Nalaskowski, K. Rubacha (eds), *Pedagogika u progu trzeciego tysiąclecia /Pedagogy at the Turn of the Third Millenium/* [in:] A. Nalaskowski, K. Rubacha (eds), Toruń 2001; A. Nalaskowski, *Przestrzenie i miejsca szkoły /Spaces and Places of School/*, Kraków 2002.

dimension); human, anthropological, cultural and social creation, made by individuals, groups and societies (social, cultural dimension)².

A clear-cut distinction between the space in the physical, geometrical and social sense was made already in the thirties of the previous century by Florian Znaniecki. In the context of this differentiation, he emphasized that people did not experience common, objective, non-quality, unchangeable and unlimited space, but that their experience offered spaces which were of different quality, and were limited, dividable, changeable, positively or negatively evaluated³. This approach, in my opinion, is a well-aimed introduction to the characterization of social space, which remains the focus of my further investigation.

The notion of social space has no material denotation, does not mean a particular place or territory. It is rather used to specify a place or territory which is distinct due to certain socially determined qualities. In this sense, social space is referred to with the idea of: the territory inhabited by a social group which has particular features and which has marked them in a special way; the place created by a certain social group which has given it a function and meaning⁴.

Discussing school and describing the classroom where integrated education takes place, the second proposition of defining social space should be referred to. Obviously, this is a place created to educate (in the broad sense of this word) pupils and integrate disabled children with those who develop properly. In this approach, the classroom has been given a sense of the place for education and meeting of the participants of the process who have different developmental abilities. This is a basic distinctive feature which differentiates such sense of space from the meaning of the space of other usual classrooms.

Place has been a notion interchangeably used with space in the discussion so far. Dictionary explanations identify it as: free space which can be occupied or filled; a part of certain space which is an object of activity and where something is going on, or in other words, a territory or an interior for specified purposes; a limited section of space in an interior or a territory intended for a particular person⁵.

² B. Jałowiecki, M. S. Szczepański, *Miasto i przestrzeń w perspektywie socjologicznej /Town and Space in the Sociological Perspective/*, Warszawa 2006, p. 314.

³ F. Znaniecki, *Socjologiczne podstawy ekologii ludzkiej /Sociological Foundations of Human Ecology/*, „Ruch Prawniczy, Ekonomiczny i Socjologiczny” 1938, vol. 1, p. 90-91. Quoted in: A. Nalaskowski, *Przestrzenie i miejsca ...*, op. cit., p. 10.

⁴ B. Jałowiecki, M. S. Szczepański, *Miasto i przestrzeń...*, op. cit., p. 316.

⁵ *Słownik języka polskiego /A Dictionary of the Polish Language/*. Vol. II, Red. M. Szymczak, Warszawa, 1992, p. 157-158.

Place and space co-occur and explain each other, but are not synonymous. In contrast to the endlessness of space, place has distinct borders and is expressed by barriers⁶, e.g. classroom walls or the territory of the pupil's desk.

This distinction was applied by me in the further part while specifying spaces and places of non-disabled pupils and pupils with special educational needs. Thus by referring to space, I mean the area which is neither accurately outlined, nor marked by clear-cut borders. Place, however, is a precisely marked territory, which customarily or through formal guidelines, has been outlined for the purpose of particular actions or persons.

Selected models of spatial location of disabled pupils in classroom⁷

The arrangement of spatial location of pupils in the integrated class can be viewed in many perspectives. In one of them, the starting point is the way the tables are arranged. They can have the structure of a horse-shoe, a bow (bistro style), a square, a fir tree (placed in an angle to the blackboard), a semi-circle, or typical rows⁸. All patterns have advantages and disadvantages. As regards places occupied by disabled children, the same problems to solve appear in all cases. They are included in the following questions:

- What place should they take in relation to each other (together or separately)?
- Should they be placed in the centre of the classroom (near the blackboard) or in the periphery?

These questions cannot be answered in an unequivocal way. A lot depends on the characteristics of the class, the teaching concept applied by the teacher, and most of all, the disabled children themselves – their developmental disorders and personality traits. That is why in the further part, some schematic solutions will be suggested. Their graphic presentation will be followed by the results of the research into the frequency of the application of these solutions in integrated classes. The starting point for data interpretation will consist in discussing the merits and faults of these solutions in regard to the variables characteristic for the development of disabled children.

⁶ H. Kwiatkowska: *Czas, miejsce, przestrzeń...*, op. cit., p. 64.

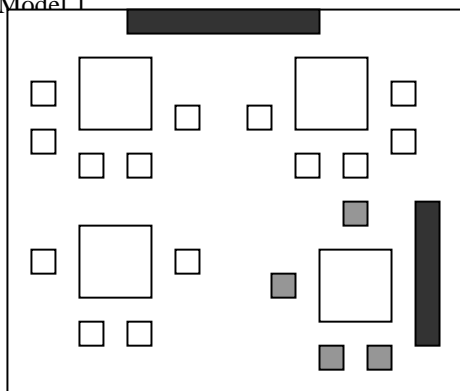
⁷ The models were elaborated on the basis of classroom observation carried out in 60 integrated classes in the propedeutic stage of education. The observation was conducted in 2006 and 2007 in the district of Silesia. The study is a part of a broader research project of which the draft title is: *Class I – III Teachers in a Complex Situation*. The concept of model types (without a statistical analysis of the application of models) was presented in the article: : Z. Gajdzica, *Modele przestrzennej organizacji kształcenia integracyjnego /Models of spatial organization of integrated education/*, [in:] T. Lewowicki, B. Grabowska, A. Gajdzica (eds), *Socjalizacja i kształtowanie się tożsamości – aktualne doświadczenia na pograniczu polsko-czeskim /Socialization and Identity Shaping – Current Experiences in the Polish-Czech Borderland*, Katowice. In print.

⁸ See: J. Popławska, B. Sierpińska, *Zacznijmy razem. Dzieci specjalnej troski w szkole podstawowej /Let's Start Together. Children of Special Care in Primary School/*, Warszawa 2001, pp. 20-23.

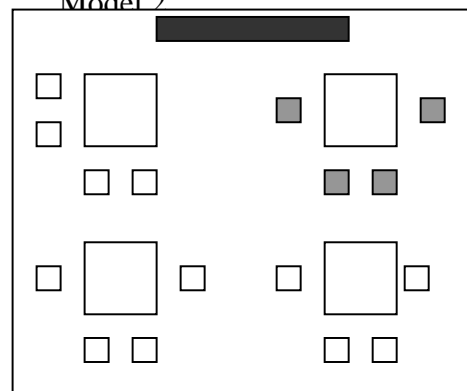
As in the presented classification the focus is on placing the pupils in a classroom, I will delete other aspects of space design in this type of education, such as: a relaxation place, a cleaning spot, a place for individual work, a wildlife spot, etc.⁹ This does not mean that I depreciate their significance, they just seem marginal in the present discussion.

The suggested schemata are limited to the traditional table arrangement, the situating of the blackboard (or blackboards – Example 1) and marking the places of the disabled and non-disabled children. I have abandoned spotting the teacher's place, assuming it is changed due to the current needs. What I assume, however, is that the teacher's desk is close to the blackboard.

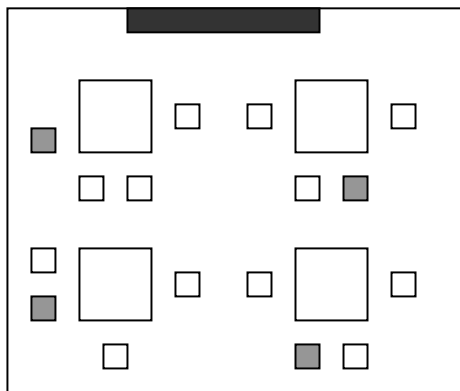
Model 1



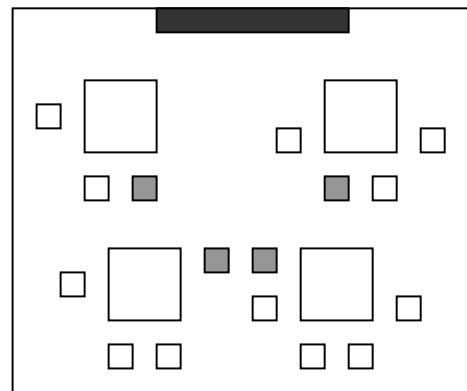
Model 2



Model 3



Model 4



Legend:



The presented categorization is a kind of generalization. Considering this categorization requires the awareness that it is a schema showing some categories, and thus, it does not fulfill all the detailed solutions. That is why, the number of indications of particular categories contains not only identical but also similar spatial arrangements.

⁹ They have been presented in details in: H. Wocken, *Organizacja warunków nauczania /Organization of Learning Environment/*, [in:] J. Bogucka, M. Kościelska (eds), *Wychowanie i nauczanie integracyjne /Integrated Education/*, Warszawa 1994, pp. 79-80

The analysis of the conducted observation shows that the most frequent models are the second and third – 22 indications each. The fourth model contains 10 class arrangements, and the first contains 6. They are discussed below in the same order as presented on the schema.

Model I: isolation

This model is an unfavourable proposition in the aspect of the process of integration. It leads to the isolation of the disabled pupils and pushes them to marginal areas of educational activities of the whole class. Nevertheless, it has its advantages, especially in case of pupils with more profound disabilities, who often implement a different learning material (e.g. pupils with moderate mental retardation, with considerable difficulties in communication), and in case of lively, over-reactive children. Owing to creating a clearly marked space for them, the special pedagogy teacher can focus on work with these children completely and can adjust educational activities to their abilities and needs (on condition that in this group the needs are not too distant).

However, this appears to be a kind of segregation in integration; thus, the rightfulness of such conduct should be considered. It might be better to carry on classes in a separate room, establishing a special class in a widely accessible school. This might be one of the reasons of such rare application of this solution.

Model II: exposure

Exposure is one of the most frequently applied models. On one hand it depicts the situation opposite to the previously discussed as the disabled pupils are exposed. They are in the centre of the class. On the other hand, as in Model I, they are concentrated in one place and sit together at one table.

This arrangement is an introduction to ostentatious integration, no matter what its socialization costs are. Thus, both its different threats and benefits can be seen. The threats include: exposing unlikeness, growing difficulties (which often become more powerful in the situation of social exposure), the subordination of the actions of the whole class group to the structure of classes for the disabled, which triggers off their domination in the field of fulfilling educational goals. The benefits are disproportionately fewer. Obviously, pupils with special educational needs are under constant control, they are focused on, not treated marginally. In case of children with relatively mild developmental deficiencies whose reactivity is close to the average, such an arrangement may bring about positive effects for all participants of the educational process. However, if disabled pupils who require a lot of individualization are dealt with, the drawbacks of this model seem to prevail.

Model III: maximal integration

The next model (with the same high number of indications as the previous one) is an example of possibly the fullest integration considered in the aspect of spatial conditions. It is beneficial for possible interactions of disabled pupils with their peers who develop in the right way. They learn how to co-exist according to the same rights (if teachers allow that). Disabled learners, in the context of space, are neither excessively exposed nor isolated. Their roles depend on extra-spatial factors. If the children have no communication difficulties (no serious hearing or speech disorders), have average reactivity and no clearly manifested difficulties in thinking, such location facilitates their socialization. Otherwise, regardless their place in the classroom, such children will always draw attention of remaining learners and teachers.

The space of special pedagogy teacher is an undeniable disadvantage of the discussed arrangement. Quite frequently teachers have to move quickly all over the classroom or give instruction to disabled pupils “over the heads” of other children, which obstructs the process of teaching and learning. In such cases, a lot depends on the cooperation with the general pedagogy teacher and on the specificity of the learning difficulties of the disabled pupils. If they are varied, special support is rarely needed in the same time. If they are identical or similar, simultaneous support is necessary, which complicates the organization of work.

Model IV: limited integration

The arrangement presented in this model appeared in every tenth class. In my opinion, it combines the advantages of the previous examples. It also has some drawbacks but they are the fewest. Disabled pupils are in the direct neighbourhood of their non-disabled peers as the strongest interactions occur among children who take places at the same table. The condition of communicative interaction, which is the foundation of levelling isolation and prejudice¹⁰, is fulfilled here. At the same time, the concentration of disabled pupils in the central part of the classroom solves the problem of their effective communication with the special pedagogy teacher, who can pass instructions quickly, strengthen motivation, and monitor pupils in a relatively discreet way. This seems to be particularly important in case of learners with communication disorders or with difficulties in thinking and in case of over-reactive children.

Final conclusions

In the aspect of theoretical evaluation of the distinguished models, the research results can be surprising. The application of the second model (exposition) surely requires more accurate studies because, from the point of view of relations taking place in the classroom, it

¹⁰ W. Jacher, *Integracja społeczna /Social integration/*, [in:] I. Machaj (selected works), *Małe struktury społeczne /Minor Social Structures/*, Lublin, 2004, pp. 67-68.

turns out to be dangerous, although it is one of the most frequently applied models in practice. Theoretically, the fourth model (limited integration) seems most beneficial, which is not really noticed by teachers, and thus, used relatively rarely.

I am fully aware that such a short presentation and description of selected models in fact only introduces the issue of spatial arrangement of the integrated class. Four presented models of placing disabled pupils constitute a one-dimensional concept which should be additionally viewed in a broader perspective, e.g.: the perspective of the socialization of the disabled child, the function of the teacher of special pedagogy, or the efficiency in the acquisition of social competences, which altogether become a task for further research.

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