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## Supporting Children with Learning Difficulties in Poland

Researches show that in Poland approximately 5-10%, in fact even 20% of pupils are the children with various kinds of learning difficulties. Cases of intensified difficulties constitute 4% of this group. The etiology as well as definition of learning difficulties is complex and ambiguous. The term of learning difficulties refers not only to listening, speaking, reading and writing disorders but also to mathematical skills disorders.

The definition used in Poland is the one formulated by International Classification of Diseases, ICD 10 published by World Health Organization in 10<sup>th</sup> edition. Specific developmental learning disorders (F 81) are divided into the following ones: specific disorders in learning to read (F 81.0), specific disorders in learning to write (81.1), specific disorders in learning mathematical skills (F 81.2) and specific general learning disorders (F 81.3). Children referred to as the ones with learning difficulties can be divided into different groups. According to W. Pilecka (1997, pg 226) the most frequent disorders are:

- perceptual, perceptual-motor activity and physical coordination functions disorders;
- hyperactivity and attention span difficulties;
- the development of language disorders;
- gaps in school knowledge;
- abnormalities in emotional and social development (adaptive difficulties).

In recent years especially a lot of attention has been drawn to children with specific difficulties in learning to read and write. The number of people striving to obtain an expert opinion given by a psychological-pedagogical counselling units is increasing. B. Roślowski (2005) claims that ineffective methodology of teaching and insufficient specialist preparation (mainly linguistic) of elementary education teachers are the cause of a predominant number of school failures. According to Roślowski, what is responsible for pupils' problems is also the lack of an individual approach to a pupil caused, among other things, by overcrowding in classes (frequently thirtysomething-person), flaws in making diagnosis and correct assessment. Dyslexia has become trendy, a lot of pupils strive to obtain a suitable expert opinion certifying the disorder since the document helps them pass examinations. This tendency is alarming.

In Polish educational system children with learning difficulties have always attended free schools accessible to all pupils. In the seventies of the past century, however, children who repeated classes twice or three times were sometimes reclassified as special school pupils.

Children with learning difficulties have the right to receive special psychological and pedagogical help (ibidem 1997).

Depending on the intensity of the extent of learning difficulties one can distinguish five levels of pedagogical-therapeutic help available:

- 1) Help provided for a child by parents acting under the direction of a teacher relying on the opinion given by a local psychological-pedagogical counselling unit and the instructions contained in it. A counselling unit makes psychological, pedagogical, speech-therapy and, if necessary, medical diagnosis. The child is offered an individual program of demands. Some counselling units apart from making diagnosis conduct specific subject classes such as, for instance, the Polish language, mathematics pedagogical classes,

supportive therapy classes (socio-therapy, music therapy, sensory integration therapy, etc.). Schools provide the children with learning difficulties with extra compensatory-corrective classes (from 2 to 5 participants with more profound disorders, to 10 participants with disorders of a lesser intensity. Unfortunately abnormalities are frequently caused by the lack of a knowledge of learning difficulties issues, dyslexia or dyscalculia among teachers or ineffectuality or negligence on the part of parents.

- 2) Kindergarten or school compensatory-corrective team run by teachers who are pedagogical therapy specialists. In practice not many schools have specialists and few children have a chance to attend the classes conducted by them. Help is also provided in the form of teaching-compensatory classes conducted by a teacher of a subject with which given pupils have particular problem (4-8 person groups).
- 3) Individual therapy offered by a psychological-pedagogical unit. Unfortunately quite frequently the units are overburdened mainly with diagnostic work to such an extent that it results in children waiting for rehabilitation for over a year.
- 4) Therapy and compensatory classes at state schools accessible to all pupils. These classes come into existence thanks to teachers' or parents' suggestions. They carry out original teaching programs and include from 10 to 15 pupils. What is the drawback of these classes is wrong classification of the pupils. Frequently troublesome pupils are 'pushed' to the classes. Moreover, a considerable number of classrooms are poorly equipped, not all the teachers are adequately qualified and financially motivated.
- 5) Therapy units for in-patients. Children stay there as long as several months or one year (they spend weekends at home). There are a few units of this type in Poland (among others Helenów near Warsaw, Łódź, the vicinity of Zielona Góra).

Among supplementary forms of help one can distinguish group camps, therapy summer camps organized by The Polish Dyslexia Association or psychological-pedagogical counselling units (Pilecka 1997, Bogdanowicz 2005).

In Poland parents of children suspected of having learning difficulties have the right to request a diagnostic test and help on the part of psychological-pedagogical counselling units without any special referral. In accordance with Ordinance of Minister of National Education 15.01.2001(Official Journal No 13, 2001) they also have the right to decide as far as their child's participation in corrective-compensatory classes is concerned, they have the right to choose a school and form for their child as well as, in the case of dyslexia and dysortography, they can decide to request special conditions during examinations. A specialist expert opinion obligates teachers to adapt educational requirements for individual needs of a pupil. In Poland since 1999 pupils have taken exams during their last year of education at six years of primary school and three years of junior secondary school. As long as they receive an adequate expert opinion from a psychological-pedagogical counselling unit they have the right to take the exams in the conditions and form adapted for their dysfunctions(Official Journal No 29/323,2001).They can exercise similar privileges when taking secondary school final exams. Ways of adapting examination conditions:

- when a pupil suffers from dysgraphia, he/she can write in capital letters or use the computer. Graphic standards of writing are not assessed. In the case of the most serious disorders the pupil can request the help of a supportive teacher;
- when a child suffers from dysortography, in open tasks what is assessed is the content of a written form, spelling mistakes are not taken into consideration;

- when a child suffers from dyslexia (has problems with reading and understanding texts) he/she can take an examination in a separate classroom, the instructions, introductory text and examination tasks can be read loud to him/her by a member of an examining board. Examination time can be extended by 50% maximum.

To sum up, children with learning difficulties have the right to receive an early diagnosis, an early, expert intervention and therapy, adaptation of educational requirements, equal opportunities during examinations. Certainly the above mentioned privileges are voluntary and these are parents, carers and later pupils themselves who decide whether to exercise them or not.

There are various methods that are used to work with children with learning difficulties. Among the most popular are among others the following ones:

- Marta Bogdanowicz's method of a good start [this is a system of exercises improving perception and motor activities. What plays a crucial role here is a visual stimulus (graphic patterns preparing for learning to write), auditory stimulus (a song) and motor activity stimulus (performing movements arranged in time and space, reconstructing graphic patterns harmonized with the rhythm of a song); they aim at improving receptors, training lateralization and sensing the body as well as spatial imagination. Classes are conducted in a team according to the grading difficulty principle] (Bogdanowicz 1989).
- Method of sensory integration [Jean Ayres's method based on the organizational process of pieces of information reaching the body and coming from particular sensory systems; brain structures recognize the received pieces of information, organize them, register them and associate them so that a person can react to them in a way which is expected by a surrounding environment] (Maas 1998).
- Method of 18 word structures [E. Kujawa and Kurzyna's method intended for simultaneous practice of reading and writing skills when using the same lexical material; there are 18 different types of words used in this method, they differ in the number of syllables, the sequence of their occurrence and the degree of syllable complexity. This is a syllable method which takes into consideration such a division of words into syllables which stresses separating consonants adjacent to each other at the meeting point of the syllables. In order to mark particular elements of the words three colours are used: green indicates syllables, black indicates consonants, red indicates vowels] (Kujawa, Kurzyna 1994).
- Educational kinesiology according to Paul E. Dennison [a special set of exercises, stimulating specific parts of the brain and mechanisms of integrating the thought and movement, which is divided into 4 groups: movements enabling crossing the centre line, exercises stretching body muscles- the so called energizing or enhancing exercises; they are used extensively in a specific sequence, they are easy and last for a short time] (Dennison, Dennison 2004).
- Program developing visual perception by M. Frostig and D. Horne [program aiming at the development of visual perception consisting of visual-motor coordination exercises, noticing figures and background, the constancy of noticing, noticing the location of objects in space and spatial awareness] (Frostig, Horne 1989).
- Newel Kephart's method [also referred to as a perceptual-motor activity program which is based on improving elementary skills- reading, writing and counting- and is mainly aimed at children up to the age of 10. Since it uses quite expensive teaching aids the access to it is rather restricted]
- V. Sherborne's method of Developmental Movement [according to this method movement is a supportive tool in a psycho-motor development, it trains self-awareness of one's body, improves physical abilities, awareness of space and activities performed in space as well as sharing space with other people and establishing close interactions with them] (Sherborne 1993)

The majority of specialists dealing with issues relating to the support and therapy aimed at children with learning difficulties assume that there is not one, perfect method. Methods ought to be adapted to specific conditions of particular pupils, sometimes they ought to be combined, modified and new solutions ought to be sought.

Currently, computer programs are one of the ways in which children with learning difficulties are provided with support and rehabilitation. Contrary to appearances, although there are so many educational computer programs not all of them suit the conditions of this specific group of pupils. Among Polish computer programs which have been recommended by The Polish Dyslexia Association one can distinguish the following ones:

- Dyslektyk 2 by Marzena and Marcin Borkowski (it can be used for self-study at home as well as for therapy classes; it consists of 64 games developing auditory and visual analysis, testing a knowledge of orthography; some exercises are based on prepared word lists others are based on wordless materials; it can be used by children who cannot write and read yet and also by autistic children; program licence has been sold to Finland where the game is called DysLex),
- The Range of the Risk of Dyslexia (program for professionals dealing with the diagnosis, it generates the outlines of general and detailed results on the basis of the entered data) ([www..bpp.com.pl/](http://www..bpp.com.pl/)).

Dyslexic pupils can contact The Polish Dyslexia Association where specialists provide one with hints, where counselling units and diagnostic-therapy offices function and where parents can get in touch with other parents who share similar problems. The Association of Help for Children and Youth with Specific Learning Difficulties has been functioning since 1991 and it embraces professionals and parents of children having difficulties reading and writing. The purpose of it is to trigger and support social initiatives aiming at increasing educational opportunities for pupils as well as diagnostic and therapy help. The association organizes conferences, workshops, publishes specialist sources, campaigns in the media and schools in order to introduce information (among others "Rights of a Dyslexic Pupil at School" Campaign in years 1997-2000) ([www.dysleksja.univ.gda.pl/](http://www.dysleksja.univ.gda.pl/), [www.dysleksja.waw.pl/](http://www.dysleksja.waw.pl/)).

It is acknowledged that one in four children of school age require periodical specialist help in order to overcome school difficulties.

Unfortunately, in Poland since the eighties of the 20th century there have been greater and greater problems as far as receiving free early help in kindergartens and schools. The number of free compensatory and corrective-compensatory classes at schools has been decreasing. Such a situation does not favour supporting children with learning difficulties. Unsolved problems and improper care may cause social damages (repeating a year at school, the lack of motivation to learn) and psychological problems of pupils (school phobias, neurosis, suicide attempts). Unsolved school failures can be the cause of worse social and career adaptation later on and can also lead to an alarming phenomenon of functional illiteracy (Pilecka 1997, Skorek 2005, [www.dysleksja.waw.pl/](http://www.dysleksja.waw.pl/)).

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