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Identity in Special Pedagogy, that is a Discourse on a Difficult Art of Seeking Answers to Important Questions

As Federico Mayor states: "Complexity and uncertainty are the key words of our times. Therefore, we refrain to advantages of pedagogy of anxiety, since it stimulates us, whereas conformity and optimism have the effect of anaesthesia" (F. Mayor 2001, p. 488). Such pedagogical unrest accompanies my musings over the modern identity dilemmas perceived from the perspective of special pedagogy.

The fall of morality, atrophy of interpersonal bonds, uncertainty of our times, differences in views, concepts and attributed meanings, increasing difficulty in telling right from wrong – they all indicate the crisis of our times which we tend to perceive more and more as the time of unusual acceleration, of enormous, spectacular change, of revaluation difficult to embrace or bear, especially for those who are weaker, elder, disabled, different. „We are all used to hearing the tales of how the present is different from the past, how the future will be different from the present, that change has become the only fixed variable, and the one thing we can be certain of is uncertainty" (B. Neville 2008, p.11). Thus we live in an unquestionably interesting period, only we are not sure if this is a blessing or a curse.

Identity – an adequate concept to describe of today's world

In this text I refer to such concept of identity that emphasizes its semantic capacity, multidimensional character, and great interpretative potential. According to H. Kwiatkowska : "Modernity has freed the issue of identity, has shown to what extent identity is sensitive to what is happening to the world, how it is dependent on the relation between man and social reality" (H. Kwiatkowska 2005, p. 11) .

Before I undertake an attempt to discuss if the concept of *identity* is/could be included in the lexicon of special pedagogy as one which facilitates defining modern reality and the problems it poses for disabled people, I would like to emphasize an extraordinary dissemination of so-called identity discourse¹, a peculiar identity hysteria²(J.Szacki 2004,

¹ I refer here to excerpts from my paper entitled „Kategoria tożsamości w dyskursie pedeutologicznym (poszukiwanie utraconej tożsamości czy jej konstytuowanie się?) [Identity as a category in pedeutological discourse (searching for lost identity or its constitution?)], which will occur in full in post-conference materials

p. 10). Whereas there are not many opponents of the identity discourse, it is still worthwhile to consider their warning that „.../ identity is a concept which social sciences should use carefully.” (P. Zawadzki 2003, p.5). It tends to be overused, sometimes as a „label thoughtlessly applied to everything that in any way distinguishes an individual or a group from other individuals or groups”. (J. Szacki 2004, p. 16). It is also worth noticing that *identity* is somehow a new word to signify an old problem concerning individualism of a person, his/her self-consciousness and subjectivity, as well as relations with others, differences between „us” and „strangers”, social stereotypes, „national character”, limitations, difference and sameness in social life (cf. J. Szacki 2004, pp. 9– 18). This popularity might also result from identity deficiency which befalls modern man who defines his role from a perspective of identity crisis. Thus, the issue of identity is related to challenges, often annoying or painful, but also stimulating and adding some meaning to our lives. „Therefore, says Baumann, deceives himself who, engulfed in search for his <identity>, expects to avoid the problems of <I> or <acting I>, to solve the dilemma of being „with” and „for”. <Identity> is nothing but a different password that opens the Sesame door. Or rather lifting the lid of Pandora's box...” (Z. Bauman 2007b, p.376). How can a disabled person be prepared for those complex choices, what special tasks is a special pedagogue facing, and, finally, what can we do to make this world more friendly, hospitable for those who have it harder, who walk slower, who often do not understand the essence of transformation, who struggle with their own limitations?

It seems that, at least in the light of the above mentioned approaches to the meaning of the category *identity* for social sciences, it is a useful category, valued by all those who undertake the effort of „reading” the changing world and searching for its specific, boundless logic. It seems, however, that the concept should be used reasonably, so that it doesn't lose its appeal due to misuse, becoming one of many in a glory-whole. After all, it isn't a universal key opening every door...

Reflexion on constitution of disabled child's identity and on the tasks of a special pedagogue

I focus my discussion around the question: what is the role of identity issues in modern pedagogy (also in special pedagogy), and what problems in constitution of a disabled

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² Eric Dupin published a book under the same title in Paris, 2004 (original title: *L'hysterie identitaire*); quoted after J. Szacki 2004, p.10

person's identity should we particularly pay attention to? Inspiration for a search for answers to such questions could be, again, propositions of Z. Baumann, who stated that a man convinced of orderliness in the world aspired to a whole and consistent construction of identity. Whereas „/.../ Truly postmodern identity is distinguished by lack of identity” (Z. Bauman 1994, p.16). However, life without identity, without esprit de corps, is frightening. A way out from that situation, as T. Szkudlarek suggests, is getting accustomed to ambivalence, finding one's place in it (T. Szkudlarek 1995, p.250). Certainly, there remains the question: does such freely construed identity enlarge the sphere of man's freedom, and is the multiplicity or the certainty of choice important in this situation? Does a partially delineated (unstable) identity give a chance for making independent choices? These questions gain particular importance in case of difficulties with construing one's own identifications, experienced by a modern man in times of crisis, degeneration, vagueness, dispersal, questioning the validity of so far prevailing moral and axiological codes, fall of authorities, and, simultaneously, in a world of global challenges, cheerful consumerism, broad access to mass culture and information. According to Z. Kwieciński, those phenomena bring the danger of social anomia, and they lead to loosening of the sense of identity, to pathological forms of blocking or prolonging the identity crisis (cf. Z. Kwieciński, p.333) Search for an answer to the question: who am I, contrary to all appearances, gains particular significance today, also in the context of dealing with the sense of loss, estrangement, frustration in the world devoid of stable and reliable sign-posts. Difficulty in self-defining does not mean conscious rejection of construing one's own identity. As Ch. Taylor puts it, identity is that without which „we don't know who we are, what our culture is, in whose footsteps we should follow, and what daemons avoid, where we come from and what is our destiny” (B. Misztal 2005, p. 26). Z. Baumann gives a following description of the dramatic situation of the man in the 20th century: „Life in a society in a state of postmodern flux cannot stand still. It has to modernize (ie: everyday get rid of out-dated features and attributes, as well as add/reject currently created/ concocted identities) – otherwise it fades. Life in a society in a state of postmodern flux, urged by a phantom of expiration, rapidly moves on /.../ Now you have to run for your life to stay in the same spot, away from the garbage can which is the destination of all the marauders” (Z. Bauman 2007a, p. 8).

One of the most crucial problems, whose importance increases along with the changes in the world, is the role of education for shaping identity. A significant role of education, understood as action oriented to train and upbringing, is socialization (acculturation), during which the foundation of a child's individual identity is raised. In discovering oneself,

experiencing new ways of perceiving oneself, in other words – in the process of self-cognition a crucial role befalls a teacher, his or her maturity and determination in building own identifications in times which are often presented in terms of crisis, regress and degeneration, but also of „life-giving impulses” (term by F. Lyotard).

The division into „us” and „them” constitutes an eternal dilemma in interpersonal relations, as well as one of many factors of antagonisms and divisions experienced by man in contacts with others. Identity is born on the ground of those antagonisms, on which Z. Baumann comments: „/.../ each party gains identity due to a simple fact that it recognizes itself as contrary to the other. The conclusion that follows is quite a surprising one: „others” are the inverse image that we need for our own identity” (Z. Bauman 1996, p. 49). While J. Szczepański notices: „Other is a mirror in which I verify and discover my identity /.../ As long as there is no other, there is no me, since the drama of my life starts when I realize my own limitations in contact with others. It is the contact that informs me about my interests, my needs which I have to adjust to the other”³ (J. Szczepański 1984, p. 56-57).

In the context of such presented issues it is worthwhile to risk a few suggestions and comments, throwing some light on the educational context of shaping one's „I” and on searching for clever ways of supporting a child on a difficult path to maturity and building its „internal portrait”, as well as a sense of distinctiveness. I cannot resist an impression that this context concerns all pedagogues, taking for granted the need to consider different abilities, needs and expectations held by our pupils. Growing up to identity, as results from previous analysis, is a function of a child's interaction with direct and indirect social environment, it is a path where one gains the sense of being and functioning as a separate person. Many children are left with only that most primordial form of identity, but for them it is as important as the next stages in creation of an image of oneself, testing ever new roles, building one's self-esteem. Meeting *the other* in educational context has a constructive dimension, enforcing, inspiring, but it may also constitute a destructive, painful experience (I consider here both parties to the *disabled – able-bodied* relationship). Fear of rejection, loneliness, together with a strong need for approval of peers and adults is a threat to constitution of identity. Youngsters reveal then conformist attitudes, readiness to yield to a group pressure, tendency to asocial behaviour, or even behaviour potentially dangerous for one's health. Since some

³ The quotations relate to my text entitled : „*INNY*” w perspektywie wymagań zmieniającego się świata.. W: *Pedagogika specjalna – koncepcje i rzeczywistość. Socjopedagogiczne aspekty rehabilitacji osób niepełnosprawnych [The OTHER” in a perspective of the demands of a changing world. In: Special pedagogy – ideas and reality. Sociopedagogical aspects of rehabilitation of disabled people]*, ed. T. Żółkowska, M. Wlazło. Vol III. Szczecin 2008, pp. 625 – 635.

young people with so-called specific educational needs finds it difficult, or even cannot take identity choices, their personal space and „life history” has to be directed by tutors. Supporting the development of identity by educational institutions (tutors and teachers) should take place on three planes. **First one** consists in concern for emotional comfort of the child in such institution, but also in clear rules, respected at all times. Especially a child with developmental dysfunctions needs prize and reinforcement for even the smallest achievements, stimulating its activity and willingness to cross barriers. **Second plane** is care for social development, creating opportunities for presence in a peer group, for learning socially acceptable behaviour, developing the ability to make contacts, or to solve problems. Here a particular role in gaining social competence falls to a special pedagogue, oriented to create a stimulating social environment without fear, tension or stress. **Third plane** of supporting the identity of a disabled child is related to providing role models, creating opportunities to practise social roles. Such „social identity offer” not only broadens the scope of a child's experience, but also it allows to learn how to function actively and independently in a group, and experience directly both satisfaction and inevitable failures. All this is conducive to building an identity which will survive/alleviate developmental crises (cf. M. Pitala 2007, pp.88 – 90). The process is also fostered by integration understood „as a process in which a person remaining so far outside a given social group becomes its member /.../ the point is to join an existing social entity without losing one's own identity” (O. Speck 1998, p. 402). Successful integration is doubtlessly influenced by a social position of the disabled and attitude towards them, by respecting the right to be different, that is to be oneself. „Integrated *others* remain different, but not worse, and integration itself is not a generous gift for those perceived as less valuable members of the society; it is rather a process in which members of a given community enrich each other through their otherness” (M. Wiatr 2005, p. 135).

To recapitulate, it is worth emphasizing that mature identity consists of a realistic image of one's own body, clarity with regard to one's gender, relatively stable attitudes and behaviours, experiencing one's continuity, engagement in performing social roles, a sense of sameness in changing developmental stages, it is identification with others, feeling bonds, perceiving oneself as a part of community, ability to think *I*, but also *We*. Such growing up to identity (while the level of advancement in this process differs significantly, and often is very limited) should be supported by pedagogues, with full awareness that the work is difficult and can never be completed. Identity is in a constant state of becoming; it is a mission to accomplish, and, moreover, a mission that cannot be avoided...

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