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### **The Contexts of Support for Development of Disabled Children in Their Ecosystem**

*'We have got only the world we create together with other people and only love enables us to create this world'*

*(H.R. Maturana, F.J.Varela, 1987, p.268, after O. Speck, 2005, p.27).*

Proceeding development of natural, medical and social sciences systematically enriches our knowledge, enables us to do detailed analyses concerning not only threats but also possibilities for undertaking the action to support development. Simultaneously, there is an expectation for attempts of multicontextual, holistic, entire analyses. In accordance with the social model of disability and rehabilitation, in activities which direct development and prevent social exclusion grows the subjectivity of the individual- the disabled child becomes an active element of the support process. In a contemporary reflection on praxeological aspects of help and support systemic interactions of various educational and rehabilitation institutions are appreciated, which 'shows a high rank and quality of psychological and pedagogical help in various kinds of therapy and autotherapy' (W. Dykcik, 2008, p. 148). In praxeological and phenomenological challenges of special pedagogy its 'task does not, however, finish only in description and analysis. It should also point at and justify the possibilities of support, which means help with finding some ways out'. (O. Speck, op. cit. p.27). Adopting a new social rehabilitation model intensifies the need to build new social sensitivity and ethical helping ties. The increase in tendencies resulting from social change, the feeling of anxiety, insecurity, poverty, violence, helplessness, for example 'street children', intensify the need of helping activities. (cf. D. Potejko, 2008). 'Contemporary systemic education, nowadays provided in many organisational, programme and methodical forms, does not create the danger of awkwardness of students with less intellectual ability, on the contrary –a number of its intentional educational activities secure individual subjectivity and personal autonomy.' (W. Dykcik, 2008, p.56). In the countries of the European Union, in a 'new approach' proposed in the ICF classification, the term 'disability' is adopted to show 'multidimensional phenomenon resulting from interactions between people and their physical and social surroundings'. (E. Wapiennik, R. Piotrowicz 2002, p.22). Subjectivity, the guarantee of the full rights also for disabled people, the satisfaction of special needs against discrimination and social exclusion intensify the helping activities. When analysing the world

of special educational needs of the disabled children the 'needs' are not defined on the basis of previously established disability scale or achievements, but with reference to how well the child fends for himself or herself as compared to the peer group' (Fintan J. O' Regan, 2005, p.11). Among the domains of special educational needs we distinguish: 'communication and interpersonal relations, thinking processes and the acquisition of knowledge, behaviour, emotions and social development, the development of senses and (or physical development)' (Fintan J. O' Regan, op. cit. p.11).

Nowadays, the social awareness of the problems and needs of disabled children who need educational help is growing. There appear some new ecological tasks. In supporting interactions it is very important to notice and implement connections, holistic actions. According to L. Vygotski development is an effect of social and educational process: the child learns through experiences encountered while solving problems with another person – usually a parent or a teacher, sometimes a sibling or a peer (Belmont, 1989). Initially it is a person co-operating with the child who carries the main responsibility for direction of the problem solving process, but gradually the responsibility passes on the child, although such interaction may appear in many different forms' (Vasta R., Haith M., Miller S. A., 1995, p.51). For Piaget the development means 'a constant reorganisation of child's knowledge by adding new, more and more complex structures.' (Vasta and others op. cit., p.48). According to Piaget 'all cognitive structures are mutually connected and every new item of information must be integrated into existing system. The need for organisation – that is integration, not a simple addition to the old one- is what extorts changes in our cognitive structures. These changes are becoming more and more complex and complicated' (op. cit. p. 48). In the process of development happens the adjustment of the information to the already existing schemes. The Vygotski's theory ( Valsiner, 1987, Vygotski, 1987, Wertsch 1980), in particular the thesis 'on the role of culture as a factor determining the development of the individual' shows that every human being develops in cultural surroundings. He also appreciates the importance of social and situational factors for child's development and the explanation for his or her behaviour. 'The culture of the surrounding environment teaches the children both what to think and how to think' (Vasta R., Haith M., Miller S. A., 1995, p.51). As the process of learning proceeds, talking to the child is a form of knowledge conveyance in the first place, later the child uses his or her own speech and the internal speech while directing his or her own behaviour. 'This change illustrates the next Vygotski's thesis, where development is meant as the process of internalisation. The whole of knowledge and thinking tools first exist beyond the child, in the surrounding culture. Development, in accordance with

the views of theorists who continue Vygotski's ideas, consists in gradual internalisation – happening mainly by means of the language- of these forms of cultural adaptation.’(Vasta R., and others op. cit., p. 52). In rehabilitation the support ‘includes dynamisation, strengthening of favourable factors or preservation of beneficial powers, mechanisms and tendencies’ (W. Dykcik, 2006, p.88). R.H Schaffer assumes, among other things, that ‘the influence of the surrounding social environment can be described in two ways. He describes the first kind of influences as non-specific and says that ‘social interactions lead to the state of stimulation (of the developing person), which, in turn, stimulates development of the brain and as a result (the individual) can proceed to the next maturity level’ (op. cit. p.92). At the same time ‘R. H. Schaffer emphasises the fact that every person needs a certain minimum of the stimulation and probably only in the situation of strong deprivation this is not supplied by the surrounding environment. The second kind of influences- specific- is connected with various educational environments, in which the development of the human proceeds, and with the contents of undertaken activities.’ (A. Brzezińska, 2006, p.15).

When analysing contexts of the support of disabled child's development in his or her ecosystem it is assumed that *e c o s y s t e m* is a need to take into account conditions for development. Whereas *c o n t e x t* - from Latin *contextus*- is a connection, a link between the individual and the surrounding world, an autonomous system of interactions of the disabled child and his or her family in a process of a systematic exchange with the surrounding world. In such an approach the main problem is a disabled child with his or her particular needs in his or her ecosystem. In a further perspective remains his or her disability. This is a need to show interrelations and mutual dependencies within the scope of the system to enable the disabled children to lead creative life, ensuring them suitable, dynamically growing conditions for development.

In contemporary sciences on education the term system is used more and more frequently for showing a certain set of interrelated elements. In these relations the components are mutually ordered and linked. In the analysis of many dependencies and conditions, norms and values it is the theory of systems which can point at the values of mutual ties and relations or at the connections between the contexts of development and the effects of the development. In psychology R.H Schaffer .assumes that ‘system is an organised whole, bigger than its individual parts. Therefore, its properties cannot be recognised only if its particular components are examined.’ (R. H. Schaffer, 2006, p.110). Appreciating the holism of expressions supporting development it is assumed that the knowledge of individual structural connections, every experience is indispensable to understand human behaviour. In K. Lewin's

psychology this is called field theory: the forces in the surrounding environment- the lifespace- decide about the psychological aspect. In biology, Luwig von Bertalanffy changes the principle of holism into General System Theory and bases it on its own diversity and organisation of mutually influencing parts. (e.g. a child as an individual, a social group, e.g. a family). In G. Batson's anthropology the term 'brain ecology' is adopted. This means that a child is thought to possess a self-adjustable system, which is only a part of bigger systems – all of them regulate the differences of experiences, process information for the optimal homeostatic conditions. The smallest change in one part leads to changes in the whole system' (O. Speck, 2005).

The system of helping activities 'limits itself to the analysis of the indirect relations between particular parts, and, in fact, to the holistic dependence' (O. Speck, op. cit. p.25). Depending on the relations and properties which are taken into account at a given moment it is possible to separate various systems from the same set of objects. In fact, in e c o s y s t e m we can separate a child as a system, systemic approach to the family, systemic approach to the school and the environment. In a system of school community we can distinguish a system of pupils, a system of schoolteachers and others. In each of them we can also distinguish a series of other systems.

1. A child with disability as an interdependent system of body and mind, mutually conditioning.

According to many authors (A. Brzezińska, 2000, Z. Włodarski, A. Hankała, 2004, W. Pilecka, 1999, Z. B. Gaś, 2008, R. H. Schaffer, 2005, R. Porzak, 1994) development is conditioned by many factors. For many years the main concern of the development has been the o u t e r r e s o u r c e s of t h e c h i l d, assuming that their maximisation and adjustment to his or her needs will become the factors which will highly facilitate his or her development and adaptation. Recently, in accordance with tendencies in humanistic psychology and humanistic pedagogy it is assumed that the f o r c e s of c r e a t i v e d e v e l o p m e n t of e v e r y c h i l d e x i s t i n t h e c h i l d h i m s e l f o r h e r s e l f m o r e o f t e n t h a n in the environment as the so called personal resources which favour creative adaptation (W. Pilecka, 1999, p.23). R. H. Schaffer shows that 'a child is not only a subject of his or her carer's influence, is not passive or submissive to the carer, is not ' a clay block' Since the beginning of his or her life the child has been actively involved in interactions with social surroundings, but also since the beginning of his or her life the child reveals a specific for him or her, biologically determined pattern of activity, as if he or she extorted some suitable-convenient for himself or herself- behaviours from the carer' (A. Brzezińska, 2006, p.15).

Many psychologists quoting the assumptions of the humanistic theory show child's resources, i.e. of a cognitive, instrumental and neotical nature, in a holistic approach (cf. W. Pilecka, 1999, p.24). A child with disability is an integral part of bigger, natural, cultural and social systems with which he or she continually interacts- they have a constant influence on the child – and the child reacts upon them (cf. O. Speck, 2005). A child is a part of larger systems, like the personality system, in which such things as self-evaluation, awareness of achievements, motivation to act, abilities to overcome difficulties and tolerance towards problematic behaviours are very important.' (cf. W. Pilecka, 1999, Z. B. Gaś, 2008). A child in his or her behaviour and experiencing should be seen as a whole. In the process of development support the thing is that we should take into account the needs and requirements, bring out potentials to reach maturity and autonomy in many spheres, including psychological, social, physical and neotical, in particular. Conditions which favour child's development are, among others, the following: a sense of understanding and acceptance, a sense of community, a sense of mutual responsibility, respect, open mutual relations (cf. Z. B. Gaś, 2008). Child's actions result from systemic interactions between conditions in the family, school, local environment and natural socialisation. In the process of continuous exchange with the surroundings the systems of support (like family or environment) focus on the strengths of the child, on his or her assets.

A. Twardowski points at arguments for the support of the disabled child's development to take place as early as possible. He writes 'experiences the child collects in his or her early childhood – both positive and negative- are very important for the course of development in further years (...). In children with mild developmental disabilities or disharmonies the early help favours the activation of the whole positive developmental potential. Moreover, it prevents worsening of the child's state and strengthening of the negative effects of disability'. He also shows that 'the early help serves as preventive measures. It prevents growing and strengthening of the unfavourable symptoms of disability and the appearance of secondary disorders' (A. Twardowski, 2005, p.37). Systemic interactions should include here 'an early, interdisciplinary, common, exhaustive, objective diagnosis of the child and the environment he or she lives in', and also education as 'a complex rehabilitation formula and, at the same time, as a process taking place on the level of the individual and the group' (H. Żuraw, 2008, p.355).

2. Family as an interdependent arrangement of family members. The problem of a disabled child becomes the problem of the family.

Emphasising a particular bond which appears as early as in the first stages of the child's life A. Brzezińska refers to the term of exchange, assuming that 'the process of adjustment of the child to the behaviour pattern of his or her carers and their expectations, mainly expressed non-verbally, is constantly accompanied by another process – reading of the signals sent from the child, discovering their sense and adapting the carers to the pattern of activity and to the concrete, visible behaviours of the child' (A. Brzezińska, 2006, p.16). Mutual contacts between children and adults or peers influence their further choices, aims in lives. 'Child's behaviour remains under various influences, but at the same time it has an effect on the behaviour of both parents. Moreover, it influences and remains under the influences of relations between the father and the mother and this, in turn, remains under the influence and has an effect on the essence of parental actions' (H. R. Schaffer, 2006, p.111). As E. Pisula writes 'the chances to succeed will grow, if the parents feel a strong support from the specialists in solving particular problems. Co-operation may, for example, help with changing maladjustable family customs, appearing in this period of the child's development, and also with finding such ways of behaviour which will prevent problems' (E. Pisula, 2005, p.21). Also A. Twardowski writes that 'the support for families bringing up a disabled child should be undertaken as early as possible and consist in providing a complex, systematic and professional medical, psychological and pedagogical help' (A. Twardowski, 2005, p.39). According to Bronfenbrenner contexts of the child's development as systems are, among other things, microsystems, in which a direct, mutual interaction takes place between the child and other members, especially within the family.' In the family system mutual interactions, ties, influences of the mother on her child are particularly significant. For a child it is significant what importance he or she attaches to the observed, also his or her own, actions, roles and relations-it means the way he evaluates them (cf. Z. B. Gaś, 2008).

### 3. Local environment as a system for help and support for child's development and the family.

According to the social model of disability the problem of disability is also a problem of the entire local environment. 'New models focus on the environment of a disabled individual and his or her potential realisation abilities and possibilities, instead of seeing the problems of the individual as having a purely internal source and emphasising his or her weaknesses.' (W. Dykcik, 2008, p.57). The conditions for both child's development support and family support are one of the indicators of child's development or effects of the support. 'They are based on the diagnosis of social attitudes towards the people with dysfunctional effects, programmes for normalisation, shaping the external conditions for individual development and attaining a

better quality of life and just the same level of satisfaction with life. They consist in uniting a society as a system, around the idea of the equality of difference.’ (H. Żuraw, 2008, p.353). This is also ‘shaping of the systems for qualities and norms. The process of normative integration has a significant meaning here. The most efficient way to achieve the normative integration is when the members of the community accept the norm as theirs, include it into their system of norms and values. Therefore, the thing is that the processes of interiorisation, implementation and symbolisation of value should be initiated’ (Op. cit. p. 354). Mezosystems, however, constitute the contexts for child’s development support. A particularly important connection for a child is the family-school connection. Positive relationships with peers, the teacher and school community play an important role in the school system. This is also a need to develop competencies for the support of disabled children’s development in teachers or to awake interest in children. (cf. Z. B. Gaś, 2008). Macrosystems are, among other things, cultural values and attitudes, whereas exosystems exist on a social level: legal system, services, social care. The system which includes a local environment is a complex of health care, therapeutic, psychological, rehabilitation and social care institutions. This is an every kind of environmental stimulation of the local institutions and local community, the school and family co-operation with local community and the institutions for help and support. This is the development of mutual positive interactions. Mutual relations between the family, school and environment may become the potential supporting the development of a disabled child.

#### The discussion of the problem

The behaviours of the child in his or her ecosystem result from systemic interactions between the conditions in the family, school and the environment. A disabled child has the right to develop and safely coexist with other people. Ecological relations, interactions and ties are particularly important for dynamisation of the child’s development. Separating different systems of the child’s life may threaten or slow his or her development on the way to autonomy and maturity, or being full of joy. While mutual ties, a climate of acceptance, interactions with parents, peers and teachers, services for support and development may become a potential dynamising development of the child. Maturana and Ravela ‘talk about structural coupling. Child’s ‘self’ – biologically initiated- develops under constraint in the contact with its surrounding. It still acts in the conditions of communication, the exchange with others and its natural environment’ (O. Speck, 2005, p.283).

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