

### **A Disabled Child in a Mass Kindergarten – Educational Perspectives**

For many years in Poland, the educational authorities represented highly segregational attitude towards the education of disabled children, as they were convinced that only schools for children of special needs will provide disabled children with proper educational conditions. (A. Maciarz, 1999, p 11). Mass education was oriented only on education of healthy and full-fit children. In the 60s of the twentieth century an idea of social integration was born in Scandinavia which, thanks to A. Hulk's efforts, was also transferred to Polish soil during the next ten years. The natural consequence of the idea of social integration was its implementation into educational system and creation of educational institutions called integrational institutions. According to the original presumptions, the integration was supposed to enable each disabled child to grow up and learn in its natural environment where the appropriate conditions for the child's development and education would be created. (A. Maciarz, 1999).

However, the realization of the integration process in education still differs from the idea itself. Although partly, on the legislation level, the educational regulations regarding the organizational side of the project are favourable for disabled people – *Act on the Education System* ensures the possibility to study in all types of school for disabled children and teenagers according to their needs and abilities, other regulations limit the possibilities to choose the institution for a disabled child. From the point of view of educational regulations, the only form of integrational education accepted in Poland is the basic integration unit – a kindergarten group, a school class of 15 to 20 pupils, including 3 to 5 disabled children. The fact is, that disabled children cannot attend a chosen institution near their homes, but the school or kindergarten which have been architecturally adapted according to the children's needs. To tell the truth, there are more and more integrational institutions, but the number of them still does not fulfil the requirements. In spite of the integration idea, the segregation practices discriminating against disabled children, are still common in Polish education system.

**–Integrational education vs. inclusive education**

Integration, with reference to social structures, is always an individual process, demonstrated by the sense of acceptance, belonging, and identification, and the result of the process is minimizing the group differences. (M. Chodkowska, 1998). The essence of social integration is the psychosocial process of creating the concept of community (of values, standards, opinions), community of life conditions and interests, of aspirations and human activities. The result of this activity should be the acceptance of autonomy of people with dysfunctions and their full incorporation into social life. (M. John, P. Baylis, 1994, p. 18).

Integration is a phenomenon that continuously undergoes significant evolution; a phenomenon that changes its shape while adapting to new problems which occur during implementation and realization. Although integration evolves from the idea of innovation for a valid norm, it should be admitted, that the ideal of the full social integration is not generally accepted in a society, and what is more – it is not supported by all the people engaged in education of disabled children or any children, that differ from the model determined by the modern school. The organization of integrational institutions does not always provide a child with appropriate conditions for development, for functioning in its natural environment and for having the satisfactory position within the social hierarchy.

Therefore ensuring the actual realization of the idea of social integration requires a step forward i.e. transformation of the integrational education into inclusive education, which constitutes the most advanced attitude in education of disabled children. Because of the lack of the proper Polish equivalent to the term *inclusive education*, the concept 'integration' is still used, which may cause additional terminology problems.

The term 'inclusion' with reference to education means perceiving the teaching matters in a wider context, which includes changes in education system and social policy. The idea of inclusive education is based on a belief that every human, including the disabled, has the right to fully participate in social life. Salamanca Statement – Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994, p.viii) states clearly: 'children with special educational needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them with a child centred pedagogy capable of meeting their needs. (...) regular schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all.'

Inclusion in education does not only mean spatial or programme integration, separation of integrational schools, but the possibility a child would have to enrol in school it would choose if not being disabled, i.e. access to any school and kindergarten. This would mean that schools would have to change the way they function and the teachers would have to

take educational responsibility for all children, including the ones with dysfunctions, also in schools, from which such children have been excluded so far. (P. Littler, 2000). Prof. Littler, a specialist on equalizing the chances of the disabled, former special education aide of UN, UNESCO, WHO, and Inclusion International emphasizes that the inclusive education contradicts the previous integration model which consists in completing the child's deficiencies and adapting it to the social 'norm' in the best possible way, which means adjusting a single child to the functioning system, and taking advantage of what the system has to offer. He sees diversity and differences among pupils as a norm, and claims that there are no 'special' needs and that disabled children are 'special' only because the educational system has not been able to meet their natural needs so far. It is the school that 'needs to be changed, to be able to adapt to particular children or to answer the greater variety of pupils population' (P. Littler, 2000, p. 3). The principle of inclusive education is a gradual liquidation of schools for children of special needs and schools separated as integrational ones for the benefit of accessibility of mass school for all, even disabled children, and creation of specialist care system. As the concept states, the special education is supposed to be a way of helping a child, and not only placing it in a particular institution.

The benefits for all children – not only the disabled ones – from the inclusive education are, first of all, the possibility of increased intellectual, personal, and social development, and the fact that the social integration process takes place in a local, natural environment and with friends around which is crucial for a disabled child. Inclusive education challenges the whole educational system as well as the way of functioning of particular institutions. It requires better and more flexible educational programmes, application of new methods as well as teaching and pedagogical means, which will fully meet the needs of children from particular social groups.

### **–Kindergarten as a place of incorporating disabled children into social life**

Kindergarten, for reasons of special educational and teaching work organization, creates unique conditions for attempts to incorporate disabled children into the life of a social group. First of all, obtaining of experience and learning in an occasional, involuntary manner, not intended by the child itself and by the teachers, is dominant in educational impacts. Education consists, above all, in stimulating the development of cognitive processes, expanding the child's knowledge about the surrounded world, development of its abilities and skills (M. KwiatowskaKwiatowska, 1985, p. 51). Organizational forms of work with children

serve integration of educational and training content. Hence, teaching a child occurs in each domain of its development in the course of all situations, related to the child's stay in the kindergarten. The basic form of activity of a child is playing, both spontaneous and organized by teachers. Each play is, however, taken up by children voluntarily, and the teacher first of all in the organization of plays, has to manage their activity, support and stimulate their inventiveness, provide inspirations and means to realize their ideas and intentions. As a result, a problem quite important in school conditions becomes less important, i.e. whether a child with dysfunctions is able to adapt to the formal requirements of learning and behaviour, a less formalized system of requirements permits a wide margin of the child's acceptable behaviours and ways of functioning.

In addition, the kindergarten period, due to the child's development characteristics, seems to be most conducive to shaping appropriate attitudes and personality by teaching and educational impacts. At that age, children welcome everything that is new and different, they pay smaller attention to physical defects of their peers and more easily accept as evident reality their individual features and a peculiar way of functioning in terms of locomotion, praxis, communication or getting to know the world. Children accept staying with their disabled friends as a natural thing, learning caution, responsibility and respect for specific needs and constraints of their less dexterous colleagues (D. Al.-Khamisy, 2006).

The kindergarten age is also a period of remarkable curiosity about the world. The child is gladly looking for information about everything that is new and incomprehensible. Therefore, in contacts with less dexterous friends many questions appear about difficulties observed at peers. Children in the kindergarten age, not ballasted with the burden of prejudices and stereotypes, ask simple questions about the specific nature of a particular disability and accept any explanations given to them as obvious. Likewise, they will gladly take attempts to use, for instance, a blind's stick, move and recognize objects using hearing and touch, communicate without the aid of speech or sit down on a wheelchair. This gives a possibility to directly acquire knowledge about the disability, being the basis for shaping integration-focused and accepting attitudes towards the disabled.

In the course of plays, children learn to co-operate with each other, negotiate and agree their goals and pursuits with the partners' desires, what becomes for them a training of socially acceptable behaviours. They recognize their own emotional states and those of other participants in a play. Playing covers up any differences between children, also those concerning fitness or physical efficiency, and removes any divisions between the players. It gives equal opportunities to all in experiencing joy, pleasure, and acknowledgement. A

properly conducted play brings out abilities, possibilities and interests of the child, affects its position in the group. Common play and the disabled child's confidence in the fact that its healthy colleague may like, accept, and even admire it, is a unique therapy which cannot be replaced by any other activities, as it enables the child with a disability to acquire the courage of "being towards others" and getting to know oneself from a positive side. In playing, children do not pay attention to their disability, activity is a source of rest, satisfaction and joy for them.

However, in spite of undeniable benefits that are connected with a disabled child staying in a mass kindergarten both for itself and for its healthy peers, one should still remember the main assumption for both the idea of inclusive education and kindergarten pedagogy: every child is supposed to receive support and stimulation in the process of its development, adapted to individual possibilities and needs. This assumption carries along special responsibilities for teachers – as it requires them to extend the scope of competences, both in the professional, axiological and personal context; competences conducive to the development of a proper perspective to see the place for a child with dysfunctions and difficulties in the education system, to build a climate in which this child would not be a problem, but the stimulus for improvement of one's own teaching methods. While teachers' substantive preparation for educational and teaching work in kindergarten seems to be acceptable, it is also necessary to state that, in principle, most teachers – apart from special educators – are not prepared to work with children with various types of development difficulties and disabilities.

Although the concept of inclusive education involves participation of consultants and assistants in special education for work with disabled children but this would require, first of all, new solutions to be prepared and implemented in the educational system, what usually creates many problems and is a process often lasting for years. Previous experience in social and educational policy in Poland shows that in reality educational regulations express only general support for the idea of integration, at the same time they contain many legal loopholes, giving an opportunity to local authorities to "by-pass" the formal obligation to guarantee the disabled children the right to be present and learn in mass institutions, on the basis of full integration (D. Al-Khamisy, 2006, p. 197-198). Hence, one should rather be sceptical when looking at a possibility to adopt regulations in the years to come, making authorities obliged to allow children with dysfunctions to participate in mass education, with the provision of proper, specialist help to them, granted by consultants. Secondly, proper methodical preparation of teachers in mass kindergartens, and especially their sense of

competence and at least partial independence from external assistance, may foster the willingness to take up new tasks and introduce, in accordance with the principle of least restrictive teaching environment, special help only where necessary. Popularization of inclusive education thus implies the need for them to extend the scope of teacher's knowledge, especially about the methodology of work with children with various disturbances in development and use of special means of teaching.

## **5. Summary**

Implementation of the inclusive education concept in mass kindergartens in the context of present educational regulations requires, first of all, changes to be introduced in the education of teachers. It becomes necessary to introduce the "kindergarten education" specialization into the studies program, obligatory methodical preparation, incorporating knowledge of special education, broadening the range of methods and forms, as well as ways of using special means of teaching, which would enable responding to specific needs of a child – also to prepare adequately universities and academic teachers to the education of pedagogical staff from inclusive institutions. It becomes also necessary to provide opportunities for professional improvement to active teachers in the form of courses and workshops, financed by local authorities, giving new, necessary qualifications.