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Professor Zofia Sękowska's Special Pedagogy – a Holistic Portrait

Nowadays, discussions and polemics over problems of education and improving abilities of handicapped people, as well as debates concerning the rights those people should have, are led very often. The reason for it is the society's interest in issues concerning the handicapped. Also continuous development and wider range of modern special pedagogy has a considerable influence. However, the evolvement of this scientific discipline is only possible due to well-prepared special pedagogues who work out essential framework of pedagogy, enriching and widening the knowledge of its subdisciplines. Their scientific and social activity contributes to developing reliable and useful knowledge for processes of education, rehabilitation and social functioning of handicapped people.

The team of outstanding scientists, and a great educators at the same time, whose scientific output is a foundation of special pedagogy, includes undoubtedly Professor Zofia Sękowska. Her scientific output has always received general recognition, and her achievements have often been quoted in different publications and articles, becoming an inspiration to study and a complete scientific base. However, those works are characterized by a very general type of deliberation. Just for this reason, a detailed study of Professor Z. Sękowska's whole output has been created (see M. Dycht 2002; 2005; 2008, K. Barszczewska, 2004).

The most difficult thing when studying scientific output of an acknowledged pedagogue is still existing doubt if writing this kind of work, we will be able to avoid excessive glorification of this person, reflecting at the same time real meaning of his/her achievements and the necessity to arbitrate the dilemma: can we be scientific impartial in such conditions? Writing a detailed study documenting prof. Z. Sękowska's accomplishments in the field of special pedagogy, I have discovered an outstanding person: a woman who is happily fulfilled in her private life, deeply committed in community service, a meritorious pedagogue... This contact with her thoughts and personality gave birth to a question that has accompanied me since then – the question about abilities and art of life – in its different dimensions... With great humility, I have been describing here Z. Sękowska's scientific work. And I have been doing this with a hope that its popularization will result in many individual meetings...

Getting familiar with Professor Z. Sękowska's pedagogical conception and achievements, in the context of their significance for modern special pedagogy, is important for some reasons:

5. The theory of special pedagogy, developed by Z. Sękowska, has a holistic character. It discusses the issues that are the most important for functioning of pedagogy of handicapped people, but it also delves deeper into the structure of subdisciplines that are typical for this field of science, providing a precious contribution in developing the constructive and valuable knowledge.
6. Her science conception lets us determine the role and the range of special pedagogy. It also helps to isolate the status and the characteristics of this kind of knowledge as a scientific discipline.
7. The theory of pedagogy that she created is not only an update of previous scientific achievements. In this context it would only be didactic activities, helping to popularize the knowledge. Moreover, we should remember about the work done in the field of scientific study (related to broadening the knowledge). Also in this dimension, Z. Sękowska's theory of pedagogy reflects the needs of developing the special pedagogy, at

present and in future, in an empirical way.

8. There are not too many researchers who have done so discerning insight into fundamental issues for Polish typhlo-psychopedagogy, like Z. Sękowska. She created basics for rehabilitation of blind people, enriching it with new accomplishments all the time.

One of the main topics of modern special education in Poland is the care to popularize in the society the conviction that handicapped individuals and those who are socially inadequate should be treated in an appropriate way. The efforts of special pedagogues must be concentrated on giving a testimony with their own behaviour, which should be a consequence of their own world view.

Professor Zofia Sękowska's scientific apprehension, discussing a pedagogical conception of education and special upbringing, can contribute to such a way of thinking. In her opinions, she emphasizes the argument that more and more attention should be paid to humanize the values and subjectivity of handicapped people (engaged in their own process of rehabilitation). This humanistic vision of humanity in pedagogy was typical for Z. Sękowska's scientific world view and it directed her view to a modern axiology of upbringing. It also shaped the accepted system of scientific and didactic assumptions. The taxonomy of pedagogical goals, that she approved, emphasizes individuality and uniqueness of every handicapped person and it shows their own developmental dynamism.

The theory of special pedagogy in Zofia Sękowska's apprehension helps to get rid of a narrow perspective of fragmentary view on this science only in partial context, limited to problems and matters of single scientific subdisciplines. It gives an opportunity to have a global view, it helps to comprehend the range of scientific influences of rehabilitation and reclamation pedagogy, as well as its connections to other sciences. It enables an appropriate understanding of the sense and proprieties of pedagogical influence on a handicapped individual and the one that is socially inadequate. It helps to notice the complexity of mutually infiltrating issues and to comprehend the substance of primal assumptions. A special pedagogue, looking for a thorough foundation, enabling to comprehend pedagogy from the distance and giving smaller problems a proper sense, will find it in Z. Sękowska's theory of pedagogy. The knowledge gathered in her elaborations is a plan of one, logically comprehensive system, discussing both general and detailed problems of special pedagogy.

The model of special pedagogy, suggested by Professor Z. Sękowska, helps us to determine the scientific status and the characteristics of special pedagogy in a clear way. Zofia Sękowska's conception of the science demands from a pedagogue, who accepts it, to recognize a theoretical and practical character of special pedagogy. Pedagogues, analysing the theory of special pedagogy, must understand that research practice is a scientific development of theoretical reflection and it is a kind of criteria for theory authenticity, as well as a factor permanently joining it with the needs and the life of handicapped people. Z. Sękowska, developing the knowledge on phenomena influencing the functioning of the handicapped, did not limit herself to contemplation of a theoretical nature. She conducted researches on a wide scale, studying range of problems that had not been studied before. She thought that scientific research is an effective way to investigate a supposed cognitive purpose and, on the basis of empirically verified truth, really created a valuable system of knowledge.

Zofia Sękowska formulated the goals of special pedagogy in the field of mutually conjugated diagnostics, phenomenology, prevention and pedagogical therapy. Such a postulate must have led to the acceptance of the assumption related to the knowledge interdiscipline, that it consisted of. It implicated the acceptance of cooperation of special pedagogy with other sciences. Z. Sękowska thought that such a cooperation was a basis of further development for special pedagogy. Being convinced about specific connections of special pedagogy with medicine, psychology, sociology, general pedagogy, economics, law

and technology, Z. Sękowska conducted her own multi-aspect studies, joining knowledge in the fields of different scientific disciplines and achieving results valuable for the pedagogy she practised. She was able to formulate accomplishments of other sciences in one homogeneous theory, oriented on special pedagogy practice. The knowledge, she developed as a result of research process, is characterized by its usefulness in rehabilitation activities, pedagogical pragmatism and primacy of functioning criterion..

Teaching deontology is another level, building the characteristics of special pedagogy, that Z. Sękowska, as an experienced teacher of special pedagogues, discussed. She presented pedagogical reflections analysing who special pedagogues are, what their competence is and what their personal virtues are, what the substance of the relation between a pedagogue and their wards is. This is a peculiar collection of notes of a wise moralist and ethicist, as well as an experienced pedagogue who makes the axiology of moral values an axiology of pedagogical values and who calls for transformation of educational reality in the accordance with those values. Z. Sękowska first emphasized personal virtues of a pedagogue's character, and then their professionalism and competence. She believed that it was necessary to develop a proper schedule for educating special pedagogues, improving educational quality.

As a pedagogue, Z. Sękowska was for an active, creative school which could bring closer to pupils the reality that surrounded them and which would do it in an adequate way. She thought a school was the place which, in all possible ways and methods, could provide pupils the most advantageous development, leading to autorehabilitation and at the same time, it would not be separated from realities of everyday life. Eventually, Z. Sękowska presented an opinion that is verified by modern educational reality as the only one right. Facing present educational reforms, her assumptions, concerning upbringing relations and school's role in special education, gain valuable substance and they are definitely worth of discerning analysis.

Z. Sękowska, determining the subject of special pedagogy, created its methodological basis at the same time. She developed a project of methods and diagnostic techniques, emphasizing their usefulness in solving problems of this pedagogy. She took part in formulating goals, rules, methods, forms and means of education for handicapped people – by popularization of this kind of knowledge in her publications and through her own didactic work. She contributed also to working out the empiric knowledge within detailed sciences of special pedagogy.

However, the greatest of her achievements, leading to broadening the knowledge on special pedagogy, are related to Z. Sękowska's accomplishments in the range of typhlo-pedagogy which became the essence of her private and professional interests. She developed the methodology of education and upbringing of blind people on the basis of different fields of typhlo-pedagogy. Apart from modification of methods, techniques and means applied in diagnostics of sighted people (and adjusted for the needs of blind people by Z. Sękowska), she also created her own research techniques for sight-handicapped people. She developed and formed rules and methods of typhlo-pedagogical work, and their value is proven by the fact that they are still present in modern educational programmes and in rehabilitation activities with children, blind teenagers and those partially sighted.

Her observations are the source of extensive knowledge, determinants of pedagogical processes, an effort to determine exactly an interpretation for effective didactic-educational and rehabilitation activities considering people with sight analysing dysfunction. I am convinced that – to great extent – they are the research base for modern typhlo-pedagogy.

The values of Z. Sękowska's achievements in the field of typhlo-pedagogy are visible also in the fact that she subjected to discerning analysis the issues fundamental for functioning of blind and partially sighted. She provided reliable information concerning the process of cognition of reality (and its structure) in case of blind people, as well as a role of speech as

means of communication. Her diagnostic researches included developmental predispositions and the range of limitations influencing school difficulties of partially sight-handicapped. She worked on methodological solutions as a part of individual rehabilitation, and the results of such pedagogical activities enrich modern didactics of the subject. She enriched the typhlological knowledge with the aspect of psychological and social circumstances of adaptive behaviour of blind people. She created a clear and adequate classification of the needs of people who are sight-handicapped, and her conception of personality development of blind people deserves to become widely popularized. Z. Sękowska was also a person who was perfectly familiar with the theory of educational rehabilitation related to blind people. Her studies on experiences of those who are sight-handicapped, connected to the loss of sight and the factors determining them, are precious and innovatory for special pedagogy.

One must say that a proper reception of Zofia Sękowska's scientific legacy should be considered on the basis of the whole of her output. The value of her work should not be limited only to her typhlo-pedagogical accomplishments. Discussions about the nature of pedagogical concept, developed by Z. Sękowska, should be analysed in a much extensive way. Modern special pedagogues, who want to recreate and take full advantage of her theory of special pedagogy, should know all the grounds she discussed.

Z. Sękowska's proposition is a successful attempt to precisely determine what the rehabilitation of disabled people is, and it was accurately recognized as a form of influence that combines different, mutually corresponding methods – taking into account, as much as possible, the needs of a rehabilitated person, and focused on early stage, continuity, complexity and commonness. Such a rehabilitation process favours the creation of conditions that help disabled people achieve success. Z. Sękowska's scientific legacy consists of number of methods and rehabilitation exercises, useful in work with the disabled. For this reason, her publications may be very helpful in finding solutions of many practical problems in the field of rehabilitation.

The value of Z. Sękowska's output for the theory and the pedagogical practice may be found in the whole of rehabilitation system. This system, in the perspective of complex improvement, takes into account also an aspect of supporting a career of the disabled person. Z. Sękowska's concept of Polish model of vocational rehabilitation suggests the necessity to define what a job is in the aspect of ergonomics. Such an approach showed a completely different perspective of a social-vocational situation of disabled people in the 20th century (it created new possibilities for employment, widened the choice of professional opportunities, emphasized support for existing predispositions, owned by a person with lower psychophysical potential).

The values of Z. Sękowska's achievements for special education should not be limited only to the past meaning. Their strengths are authenticity of theoretical conclusions and continuous validity of her research results. This legacy is an obvious confirmation of Z. Sękowska's belief about the necessity to continuously update achievements of special pedagogy – as much as the science is able to meet the new needs of disabled people.

Writing about Z. Sękowska, one should also remember about this person as a theoretician who creating her own vision of a scientific discipline referred to the axiology of upbringing, who considered the basics and the criteria of assessment within special pedagogy. Pedagogues need this axiological conception to formulate their own educational ideal and to recognize the values they would like to teach in their own pedagogical work. Identifying Z. Sękowska's pedagogy with an axiological attitude results clearly from her commitment and the will to influence the social situation of special education.

Z. Sękowska's conception of pedagogy may become a leading suggestion for modern Polish special pedagogy, useful in overcoming its present problems and inspiring to conduct new researches. It may play such a part if it is not limited to shallow studies. It creates a system of logically combined statements,

fundamental for special pedagogy, only as an exactly acquired scientific legacy. Only in such situation, it is possible to understand the substance of Z. Sękowska's conception fully and correctly.

The evidence proving this is modern positive evaluation of her pedagogy made by a great number of special pedagogues. It should also be remembered that her works are still widely applied and they have not become out of date.

A close contact with Professor Zofia Sękowska's legacy may result in more discerning consideration of present and future level of special pedagogy development, and her life and scientific accomplishments may become an essential reference for many modern pedagogues.

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