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Educational and Social Inclusion of Handicapped Children. Polish Experiences

Abstract

This paper is dedicated to a very difficult and important subject – inclusion. Removing barriers, spreading social awareness and firmly established assistantship-guidance: these are the pillars by which inclusion is no longer an idea, but it becomes a process of creating a modern model of human functioning in the world. This pattern is primarily based on a respect for, and an understanding of human rights. Particularly sensitive to the idea of inclusion is a broadly defined area of education. It is a place where the human is preparing for life in the society, shaping personality, acquiring knowledge, competencies and skills to find their way in the modern world. That is why it is so important that every person can participate on equal terms in the learning process, and this process takes into account the capabilities and abilities of individuals.

Keywords: special education, inclusion, integration, disability

Introduction

Social functioning of people with disabilities is included in two concepts. The first one usually correlates with a negative or positive, but masked attitude towards people with disabilities – it is based on segregation practices, including the pseudo-integrated practice, which has roots in ancient times (Czyż, 2014). This is the concept of functioning homogeneous communities, according to which people with disabilities only in such an environment, will not be subjected to the lack of understanding, aggression or derision. The second concept, correlating with an open and positive attitude but often functioning at the border of triangle drama, where we are dealing with a distorted form of help, is called in the literature the ‘concept of integration’ (Ruka, 2009).

Considering the above, in the modern world full of competition and in the constant pursuit of material goods, we can observe two approaches to people with disabilities – the first based on ignorance and not paying attention to the needs of others, the second totally different – offering support and even sacrifice, but taking into account the specific conditions (Baylis, 2002). Neither the isolating approach nor the integration model is beneficial for people with disabilities. In both, it lacks balance and above all “averageness”. The first approach excludes people from society and reduces the biopsychosocial functioning of human beings, the second engages people into society, but at the same time it forgets that these people are full members of the society. The implication of efforts to balance these approaches is inclusion. Inclusion is based on the idea of equality and assumes that disability is not a basis for exclusion, but the “emergent-growing-uplifting” variety, which is a prominent feature of every human being, such as hair color, race, religion or gender, and each member of society is different – not worse or better, but requires the specific circumstances of the functioning in a spirit of understanding, respect and

acceptance. Support for the functioning of that involves creating adequate conditions to the specific needs (Martz, 2004).

Awareness, knowledge and spreading the idea of inclusion

In the process of inclusion a special place occupies awareness of social needs, which affect social relationships, determines development opportunities and proper functioning, shapes the system of norms, values and affects the self-esteem of the individual. The personality and capacity of people, which is shaped by social interaction, implies self-esteem, the way of self-realization, the sense of authorship, making choices including own career paths, going into social roles, transferring the system of education and culture to the next generation. Social attitudes determine the quality of life of people with disabilities, but often “society cannot cope with the creation of conditions and developing appropriate skills in these people” (Żółkowska & Wlazło, 2009, p. 481).

The results of inclusions depend on the environment. Social forces may enhance the beneficial effects of rehabilitation, but also or primarily deteriorate the quality of life of people with disabilities. Deeply rooted in the culture and traditions, the practice of segregation cannot, however, in the era of the twenty-first century, be an excuse for a lack of empathy and understanding of basic human rights. They cannot be the reason for the marginalization or even social exclusion of people with disabilities. Spreading awareness and appropriate attitudes will activate the social potential of the inclusion, as Kowalik (1999, p. 160) believes, in any environment, there are powerful forces conditioning process of improvement. Discovering it and strengthening liberate society from many years of practice-based stigmatization.

In the context of education, the greatest deficiency correlates with a low level of knowledge and social competence, as well there is observed the lack of willingness of the school environment for the joint education of people with different development needs. This is due mainly to the lack of experience in working with disabled people and a low level of specialist trained in this field. As reported by the study, despite increasing public awareness, still the concept of inclusion on the basis education is not understood nor is included in the policy of integration. A child with a disability, even though the law can and should implement compulsory education in any educational institution, most often goes to schools or departments of special integration. The child becomes the object of the competition in the struggle for posts and finance, and their needs are often the last element of choice for a development path. At the same time, the study shows that children with special educational needs are best cared for in specialized profiled institutions, they “die” in mainstream schools, even when the schools are implementing a policy of integration. Here, even more than in special education, we can be aware of the lack of personnel preparation to work with pedagogical expertise, which exacerbates the problem of understanding the specifics of the disabled person. It creates the appropriate conditions, and setting goals tailored to the real possibilities of the disable person.

Regardless the type of school, inclusion is often not the idea springing from the needs and actual realization of its objectives, but of compulsion. Until the sincere desire, not legal regulations, are the reason for its implementation, it will not be effective (Czyż, 2013).

Barriers and their removal

Shortage of knowledge and awareness, social reluctance and closing on the idea of inclusion in the confrontation with the needs of disabled people is the reason for the formation of various barriers. Environmental limitations of persons with disabilities should be divided into: situational, institutional and dispositional. The most important factors creating barriers include: low level of knowledge and public awareness implying social isolation, errors in the system of support and development of people with disabilities and their families, lead to their insufficient preparation to perform social and professional roles, insufficient material resources, which are corresponding with disabled people needs.

Situational barriers are related to environmental conditions occurring at a certain time, which limits the ability of the person to access higher education. The primary may include eg. the cost of education, liabilities affecting the lack of time to study, lack of support – assistant, transport capacity, architectural barriers. While institutional barriers include practices and procedures that may discourage or exclude a child from education. The barriers in this category include bureaucratic problems, social attitudes with regard to the level of consciousness, individual requirements and the lack of adequate information about the possibilities of making education at a certain level. Barriers include disposable psychophysical predispositions, including the type, degree of disability, age, emotions, coping strategies in different situations and others (U.S. Congress and the Secretary of Education, 2012). Removing barriers means providing opportunities for personal progress, development of the personality, promoting the development and passion, finally providing a decent existence. It is conditioned by the level of social openness and the creation of maximum customized training conditions. This is putting pressure on the preparation for adulthood based on individual educational trails, where it is combined both passions, capabilities and needs of the subject. It is also creating a system of financing to support the development, in terms of investment, which will result in energy independence of assistance institutions in the future.

Counseling - support

To make good educational decisions people with disabilities can and should benefit from the support of skilled professionals, which in adulthood will result in the possibility of self-realization, gaining autonomy and independence. The goal of guidance and assistance for people with disabilities is an insight into themselves and clarifying the possibilities and expectations, by identifying their aptitudes, interests, but also the possibility of taking into account the specifics of the labor market and economic conditions.

The main goal of Polish counseling is to catch up to European Union standards in the context of keeping individual paths selection and career development, taking into account the specific nature of disability and the resulting individual skills, abilities and interests (Wojtasik, 2009, pp. 491-501; Waddington, 2010, pp. 88-106). English studies show that advisors cooperation with disabled persons, collective planning, modifying educational paths, promoting suitable choices and the pursuit of real benefit, truly improve the social and professional situation of young people with disabilities (DCSF / DH, 2007). The Danish and Dutch experience confirms that the

policy of education and employment of disabled people becomes a global solution. Implemented solutions must be based on the real possibility and must take into account the requirements of the labor markets. It is noted that the combination of capabilities, interests and requirements of the market, as well as the policy of social support of disabled people in different countries, is a very difficult procedure, and in some cases even impossible (Høgelund, 2003; Żółkowska, 2005).

In Poland, as in other European countries aims of counseling – achieving self-reliance and self-sufficiency at the feasibility of their own interests – are possible through the activities on global and theoretical levels, which can be found in the regulations and statutes of the Ministry of National Education and Sport. It describes the principles of public psychological-pedagogical out-patients clinic, including public clinics and specialized local, which can be realized through:

- educational classes for children and teenagers;
- curriculum and educational profile;
- cognitive stimulation and integration into the labor market with the opportunity to gain work experience;
- cooperation with employers;
- individual counseling and professional development (Wojtasik, 2009, p. 496).

However, the lack of actions can be still observed in the field of counseling in support of the development people with incomplete efficiency. Statistical data on education and employment of persons with disabilities testify the low efficiency of interactions that provide consulting and activating. As reported studies in Poland more than half of the disabled have only a minimal education level – primary, secondary and vocational education (vocational 27.8%, lower secondary 1.9%, primary 33.2%). Higher education has an 8.1% disabled, post-secondary education 1.5%, average 23.8, and 3.7% without any education. However, since the 90s of the last century it is observed a significant growth rate of the number of people with disabilities to undertake training at a higher level. Over approx. 10 years there has been a 20-fold increase in people taking their studies at academic level (Ciepiłowska, 2009, p. 30). Importantly, just highly skilled persons constitute the largest percentage of employees with disabilities – 28.5% (who on the Polish labor market account for only 14.8%) (Kukulak-Dolata & Sobocka-Szczapa, 2013, pp. 11-27).

The causes of this situation, associated with a very small percentage of people with disabilities in the labor market, should be found in the social constraints including access to education, but also all of inadequacy selection of methods, forms and direction of education to the opportunities and psychophysical predisposition individuals. Even the choice of school at the primary level or secondary school is usually dictated by place of residence, without taking into account individual learning profile. Career choice in most schools is deferred to the level of upper secondary education. Studies also show that about 18% of persons with disabilities realize compulsory education in non-compliance with the recommended form of education, and at the level of primary school the percentage of such students reaches 45.6% (Chrzanowska, 2001, p. 392). There are not only doubts about the appropriateness of educational path, but also doubts about the quality and effectiveness of education people with disabilities, which often does not create adequate conditions for the development. As shown by the evaluation reports, on the

one hand educational inclusion enters to the ground Polish schools and even includes children with profound intellectual disabilities, on the other hand, education is not creating adequate conditions for the development for those with disabilities (Czyż & Gałuszka, 2016).

The expectations of people with disabilities

Expectations of students with disabilities in the context of inclusion implemented on the basis of education are conditioned primarily by their own development needs. The basic include the removal of external barriers that make it difficult, sometimes even impossible functioning and self-fulfillment including architectural barriers, removing psychosocial barriers through spreading knowledge about the specifics of disability, organizing sessions, meetings and interpersonal training. Great importance pupils and students with disabilities attach also to make changes in the rules and curricula, and training of teachers and lecturers. Besides eliminating extrinsic barriers, students are demanding a system of psychological support, counseling, and providing access to assistants and intensive help in solving problems (Pilecki, Olszewski & Parys, 2000, pp. 109-110). The priority in the functioning of education is the unblocking the access to it, but with a narrower choice of direction dictated individual ability of entities to remove barriers – particularly of architectural and social barriers including raising awareness and sensitivity to the environment. It also calls on introduction of alternative forms of teaching using modern technology, including distance learning (Kwaśniewska, 2006, pp. 135-136). In addition the process of inclusion is connected to the skills of bringing adequate support from consideration of readiness of the disabled person and their expectations, as well as increase the professionalism of staff and provide adequate teaching facilities and the friendly environment (Witek & Kazanowski, 2006, pp. 140-146).

Local education policy and the global

European countries, including Poland, support jointly established laws which meet the needs and expectations of people with disabilities in education: university education and continuously. It allows the acquisition and improvement of professional qualifications. Academies, universities, colleges and others of European Union are trying to assist the functioning of individuals with disabilities mainly through financial support, partly or totally refunding costs for disabled who require the organization of special equipment and teaching aids, the support of a personal assistant, accommodation and travel costs. In some countries, the registration fees and tuition costs are reduced, and these people are provided priority in enrollment (eg. Germany), ensuring that the chosen direction is consistent with the psychophysical possibilities and a medical certificate. Unfortunately, there is still unfavorable division of disabled people according to the criterion of age – for children and adults, where the lack of patency in the system of broader care and support (Waddington, 2010, pp. 88-106).

In Poland, there is a system of university cooperation inter-linked under the relevant agreements with the city authorities, which operate these institutions. This allows better access and faster exchange of information, but above all four taking

initiatives to improve the quality of education. Polish universities support people with disabilities with Office for Persons with Disabilities. Assistance is offered in the form of: sign language interpreters, assistants, courses orientation, adapting teaching materials, remedial classes, language courses, psychological support, guidance counselor, and consultants for crisis situations, promoting the activation of students through participation in conferences, programs and scientific projects and very popular internship programs. Each person can apply for financial help in the form of a scholarship. It is also granted on an equal footing scholarships (<http://www.up.krakow.pl/main/?page=regulaminy>).

Conclusion

Bridging social inequalities should be a priority activity of any highly developed country (Leicester, 2000). Policies promoting awareness of the process of inclusion, including access to education, implementation the obligation of education, skill sets and reaching educational goals according to the needs and capabilities of the individuals should occupy a place among the most important tasks that determine the modern system of education. It creates not only a real environment, but also lays the groundwork for the education of the next generations: generations operating in another world, the time of crossing borders, abolition of division, inequality and injustice. It determines the possibility of entering into social roles and the opportunity to participate fully in work, family, culture. The educational process should provide the same opportunities for personal progress, promote the development of passion and personality, finally provide a decent existence in conjunction with the possibilities and needs of individuals.

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