

ORGANIZATION AND FUNCTIONING OF SPECIAL EDUCATION ON THE EXAMPLE OF THE COMPLEX OF SPECIAL EDUCATION SCHOOLS IN ŁOMŻA

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Abstract: First schools for disabled and socially maladjusted students in Poland emerged in the 19th century. Since the creation of first special institutions, education of students with disabilities has changed considerably. The aim of the article is to present organization and functioning of special schools as well as to overcome the stereotype of comparing special schools to ‘storage points’. The experience the Complex of Special Education Schools in Łomża was adopted for the purpose of analysing the subject.

Key words: special education, mental retardation, education for intellectually retarded

DOI: 10.34668/PJAS.2018.4.4.03

Introduction

In every society, some part of the population faces difficulties in achieving educational success due to the objective internal barriers connected with restrictions in mental capacity. The world we live in demands that every child, irrespective of its psycho-mental condition, could be brought up, acquire knowledge, shape ones own interests and enhance skills in broad context with peers. Polish law obliges the state authorities to provide all citizens with universal and equal access to education. Public authorities have the duty to secure disabled people (including those with mental retardation) by implementing the law that guarantees them education in accordance with the rules of equality before the law and prevents discrimination [1]. This led to the introduction of special schools and one of the most significant factors of their functioning is long term experience in working with disabled children and a proper preparation of the institution for students with special educational needs.

The aim of the degree candidate’s work was to present the organization and functioning of special schools at various levels of education as well as to challenge the stereotype that special schools are a form of storage points. The work proves the thesis that it is a very unjust opinion, which has nothing to do with the reality and that the presented forms of special school students’ activation reveal how crucial role is performed by these kinds of facilities, as a fundamental goal of special education – irrespective of the disability level – is to prepare students as much as possible for independent life, where the fulfilled roles will harmonise with the individuals’ needs and social expectations. The experience the Complex of Special Education

Schools in Łomża was adopted for the purpose of analysing the subject.

The place of special schools in Polish education system

Child’s birth is undoubtedly one of the most beautiful moments in human life. Questions arise of how it is going to look like, who it is going to resemble or who it is going to be in the future. When the child is born, parents can obtain answers to some of those questions, but they do not always correspond with the expectations. When the diagnosis is established that the child is mentally retarded, the concerns arise not only connected with the child’s health, but also with what friends and neighbours will say. After some time, there comes a moment when parents must take a decision about the way their child is going to be educated. One of the options is a special school and the decision about the selection of this kind of place is always very difficult and gives rise to many fears and doubts.

Special education could be defined as ‘a conscious, planned, long-term and systematically implemented process of impacts on disabled children and adolescents with deviations from the norm, which is adapted in terms of content, method, form and organization of education as well as demands to their specific needs and possibilities. (...)’ [2]. Special school is an institution implementing specific educational, pedagogical and care tasks. It should, therefore, reasonably analyse individual needs of its students. It should be added that the primary objective of special education (irrespective of the mental retardation level) is to prepare students as much as possible for independent life with integration into the society [3].

Special education constitutes an integral part of the Polish system of education, which is regulated by numerous legal acts [4–10]. Moreover, Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities also mentions the universal access to education. It states that ‘States-Parties recognises the right of the disabled to be educated. In order to implement this right without prejudice and on equal terms, States-Parties ensure an inclusive system of education, which enables integration at all educational levels and in lifelong learning (...). Considering the special needs of a disabled child, States-Parties have to provide it with efficient access to education, health care, medical rehabilitation, professional training and recreational possibilities, which allow children to achieve the highest possible integration level with the society they live in [11]. The state has to provide equal education possibilities for children, adolescents and adults in the spirit of integration. It should create such conditions that the education of those people would constitute a part of the country’s education system. It is necessary to assure the accessibility of schools and supportive services, which aim at satisfying the needs of persons with various kinds of disabilities.

Special school differs from the general one mainly with the program and methods of teaching¹. The starting point of special schools’ work is a child and not the program, in accordance with the statement: ‘that the ideal of a child’s education is not about gaining knowledge, but about developing its skills’ [12]. Among the characteristics which differentiate special schools from the general ones, we can enumerate, among others [13]:

- small groups of pupils in particular groups (from 2 to 6 depending on the disability level) – it greatly facilitates work with children and provides the possibility to individually adapt it to every student [14],
- teacher’s assistants are employed, who support his or her work,
- special schools offer a wide variety of extra-curricular activities, which facilitate the best possible development of a child. These are mainly remedial classes, which aim at the development and compensation of functional disorders. Moreover, the students gain access to hippotherapy, dog therapy, sensory integration, speech therapy, sports, rehabilitation holidays, trips or circles of interest,
- developing skills necessary for independent existence of an intellectually retarded person,
- preparing for the fulfilment of proper social roles and obtaining profession allowing to perform work in the future.

¹Referring to students with mild intellectual retardation, the regulations do not include the type of school and do not provide for a separate curriculum for general and special schools.

Special schools provide care, upbringing and education of disabled students at all levels of school education. Tasks, which they aim to fulfil are mainly about shaping habits and practical skills, necessary in every human’s life, teaching proper social attitude and cultural rules of everyday life. Special school is a place, where children with similar problems meet. This special kind of school creates conditions that provide students with psychological comfort and the feeling of emotional security as well as the conditions and situations fostering and perfecting their self-caring skills as well as self-reliance. Special school gives its students the possibility to exist, the feeling of being good enough, or even the best. They can participate in tournaments, special olympics, competitions and become masters in their own discipline.

Disability of special school students

It should be pointed out that not every disabled student, even those with severe disability, will attend a special school. Children and adolescents with motor system disorder, who move on wheelchairs, can serve as an example. They learn in general schools, which are suited for the disabled. Professor Zenon Gajdzica highlights that the commonly accepted indicator of special schools classification is the kind of students’ disability [15]. The students of special schools will be the persons with sensory or mental disability. Due to this, we can conduct disability classification according to [2]:

a) kinds of disability:

- sensory – disorder of sensory analysers i.e. sight, hearing, sight and hearing (deaf-blind people);
- physical – motor organ disorder;
- mental – mental disorders as well as personality and behaviour disorders;
- multiple disability;

b) disability levels:

- mild;
- moderate;
- severe.

Special schools are attended by children of various age groups and with various disability levels. The literature differentiates numerous mental retardation levels, starting with mild mental retardation, through a moderate as well as severe ones and ending up with the profound mental retardation [16].

Students suffering from mild mental retardation usually gain the majority of skills necessary for independent functioning in everyday life. The cognitive activities are mostly disrupted, among which one can enumerate mainly perception, attention, imagination, memory, thinking and social

orientation [17]. The children, in many cases, attend general schools and they implement general education curriculum, just as the rest of the students. Only the students with moderate and severe retardation implement other curriculum.

People with moderate and severe intellectual retardation more often experience sight, hearing and speech functions disorders. Generally, they have problems with focusing attention, but they can concentrate on performing simple tasks, or on subjects they are interested in. It is more difficult for them to memorize, recognize and recreate information and their thinking is of an illustrative character. They work slowly, articulate simple sentences, as their vocabulary is limited. Special schools teachers, while working with moderately retarded students, pay particular attention to teach the skills which will enable everyday functioning as well as writing, reading and counting to the best of the student's ability [18].

Severely intellectually retarded people have their motor system highly impaired and also the speech development. They can display feelings, however, they express them in a primitive manner, i.e. a very simple one, without full control of their emotions. Learning to read or write is practically impossible. Special schools give them the opportunity to learn basic activities, necessary in everyday life, but anyhow they will demand care, as severe intellectual retardation makes people suffering from it stop in their development at the level of a six-year-old child [18].

The worst case of intellectual retardation is a profound one. Person suffering from it stay at the level of functioning of a three-year-old healthy child. They gain only the most basic self-service skills and demand constant institutional care [19].

Moderately or severely intellectually retarded students constitute the only group of students, which implements a separate core curriculum of the general education. 'The specificity of teaching students with moderate or severe intellectual retardation is about the overall teaching and upbringing, integrated, based on multisensory learning about the surrounding world – during the whole educational process'². The construction and scope of the core curriculum for those students significantly differ from the general education core curriculum learned by other students. This is caused by the specificity of the students with moderate or severe intellectual retardation functioning, which demands a very individual approach to the process of their education [20]. The core curriculum determines only the main objectives, which are stated very generally, so that every student with mo-

derate or severe intellectual retardation could implement them according to the level of his or her abilities and psychological and mental restrictions.

As was mentioned, every human being, also a disabled one, has the right to educate and public authorities have the obligation to provide their citizens with universal and equal access to education by creating and supporting the systems of individual and organizational assistance for every pupil and student. The right of intellectually retarded children is also granted by the Mental Health Protection Act, which forces the organization of education for mentally retarded children and adolescents, irrespective of the retardation level [21].

The aim of educating students with mild and severe intellectual retardation as well as with multiple disabilities is to consolidate and expand knowledge, teach social competencies, adaptability and how to acquire new abilities allowing independent functioning [22].

Activation of students in the Complex of Special Education Schools in Łomża

To become a student of the Complex of Special Education Schools in Łomża, a person should 'possess a valid Psychological-Pedagogical Counselling Centre opinion about the need for special education due to intellectual retardation as well as intellectual retardation with autism, or motor system disability, sight weakness or hearing loss' [23]. The recruitment of students to this school takes place at parents' request.

The Complex of Special Education Schools in Łomża, apart from the obligatory educational and remedial classes, implements a wide range of initiatives, which could help students achieve the highest possible level of independence. Due to this, the complex cooperates with the local environment, among others [24]:

- the North-Mazovian Museum,
- Public Kindergarten No. 2,
- Teacher Training Centers,
- Municipal Public Library,
- Municipal Culture Center,
- the Doll and Actor Theater,
- Gromada Hotel,
- the Police,
- local entrepreneurs, where the youth received professional training (e.g. Professional Hand Car Wash – Zbigniew Jakacki).

The school has been for many years cooperating with associations, nongovernmental organizations (Childrens' Friends Association, Quźnia Dzieciom Association, Actively Stigmatized People Association – 'Ja i Ty') as well as with the State Fund for Rehabilitation of Disabled Persons (PFRON).

²The Regulation of the Minister of Education of 14 February 2017 on the core curriculum of the preschool education as well as core curriculum of the general education for primary school, including for students with mild and severe intellectual retardation, general education for vocational school I stage, general education for special school preparing for work as well as general education for post-secondary school (Journal of Laws of 2017, position 356)

The cooperation with all those organizations is invaluable as assistance and support provided by the school's friends help the students to open on world and the world can get to know and 'familiarise' with the mentally retarded. This help takes various forms, but it is usually a nonmaterial assistance, for example: cooperation on organizing and conducting school and city events, help with transport for various events and trips outside school, e.g. for horse riding or sailing.

Moreover, the Complex of Special Education Schools in Łomża, apart from the cooperation with the aforementioned entities, implements various educational projects, among others: 'Ticket for the Future', 'My Expenditures', 'I take care of Myself', which were implemented in the form of a city game. Within the projects, the students had the opportunity to visit numerous places, see new things and listen to interesting stories. They actively participated in the undertaking, tried their strength in solving numerous cases, answering questions, solving quizzes, surveys, performing simple activities in the visited places.

The game 'Ticket for the Future' was aimed at presenting the students with the history, culture and customs of Łomża and the surrounding. The adolescents supervised by the experienced workers of the Municipal Transport Company in Łomża got to know the rules of travelling, gained independence when buying a ticket, covering a well-known distance e.g. from school to house etc. The game had the purpose of consciously breaking the patterns and stereotypes, but foremostly teach tolerance. The project was based on strict cooperation between the school and institutions as well as local firms. By proper usage of urban transport, it aimed at promoting proper behaviour in buses and teaching mutual kindness. Additionally, by adding historical background, it strived to awake love to homeland and the multicultural motifs of our area were used to enhance respect to another person [25].

Educational project 'My expenditures' transferred knowledge on money management [26]. The students consolidated knowledge on the value of work and earning. They learned about planning expenditures, rules of money saving, banking services, opening a bank account, using ATMs and bank accounts, preventing credit spirals and hire-purchase. They extended their competencies on the proper money management, establishing positive and proper relationships with other people as well as taking independent and responsible decisions. Acquired knowledge and skills will benefit in the future by allowing to enter into adulthood more confidently, being more resourceful and independent from others. During the implementation of the project on educational classes as well as during school trips, the students learned about the value of money, prices of various goods and services. They learned about money and saving system,

planning expenditures, the way of managing their own money.

The urban game 'I take care of myself' implemented in 2017/2018 school year was based on strict cooperation between the school and the Voivodeship Training Centre for Drivers in Łomża as well as such institutions as: ZOZ Regional Health Care Centre at Wiejska street, Beauty and Hairdresser's Saloon at Nowogrodzka street, Dental Centre 'Demed'. With the help of the aforementioned institutions, the teachers reminded the students about the rules of safe participation in the traffic, enhanced skills on caring about healthy lifestyle, consolidated proper personal hygiene habits, realized the need for observing personal hygiene and improved the skills connected with preparing healthy dishes for students and their relatives [27].

Apart from the aforementioned projects, the Complex of Special Education Schools in Łomża organizes supported apprenticeships, which are an efficient method of allowing the persons with low level of functioning enter into the labour market. The utmost aim of educating students with mild or severe intellectual retardation, or students with multiple disabilities, learning in Special Schools Preparing for Work, is an efficient preparation of the youth to adulthood, including the practical preparation to work on the open/protected labour market. Supported apprenticeships are based on learning various activities and skills necessary for working in the posts selected by the students, e.g. practising peeling and cutting vegetables in restaurant kitchen. Supported apprenticeships take place with teacher's participation (employment counsellor or other specialist), who then fulfils the role of a job trainer and assists the student in performing his or her duties [28]. Due to this program, every student of the School Preparing for Work had the possibility of acquiring practical skills connected with work by providing him or her with practical classes taking place at school and outside it. Those classes complied with the student's predispositions and interests.

Conclusion

Intellectual retardation is vitiated by the greatest number of myths and stereotypes, which have nothing to do with the real characteristics of individual persons. Intellectually retarded students have problems with adaptation skills and demand various support to gain independence in adult life and occupy the rightful place in the society. Their disability emerges in the developmental period, between their birth and the 18 year of age. Therefore, it is important for them to obtain professional assistance, which help them achieve the highest possible level of independence.

It is commonly believed that special schools do not add anything to intellectually retarded students' lives and that they only serve as a kind of storage places. Students at-

tend school because they have to, due to legislation. Intellectually retarded people, as everyone of us, want to be appreciated, praised and special schools provide them with such a possibility, which would rather be impossible in a general school. The Complex of Special Education Schools in Łomża is not only a school educating intellectually retarded students, but also an institution, which tries to 'disenchant' people's thinking about the disabled. Intellectually retarded people meet with strong prejudice, however, the awareness of the society is increasing in this field. Students, teachers and the whole personnel of the school believe that what they are doing have sense and brings effects. It is true that these are not successes on a worldwide scale, but the successes of a daily life. Simple activities, which allow intellectually retarded persons feel independent, are a great motivation to constantly work and develop. A great achievement of oligophrenopedagogy specialists is teaching everyday work to intellectually retarded students, such as e.g. cleaning, washing, laundry, ironing, sewing up the hole, sewing up a button, or even preparing a simple dish. Healthy people may seem that performing those activities is nothing unusual, but for the mentally retarded, it is a result of many years of work and exercises. Achieving maximum independence of the students is the objective adopted by every teacher of the Complex of Special Education Schools in Łomża. The presented forms of special school students activation display how important role is fulfilled by these kinds of institutions.

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Received: 2018

Accepted: 2018