

Integrated Education in Contemporary Poland

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Abstract

This article presents the most important aspects, organizational principles and achievements in the field of integrated education in Poland. The author outlines the dynamics of the development of institutions of integrated education and institutions with integrated sections between 1989 and 2010. She describes the actual state of teaching conditions, discusses the immediate social milieu of learners with special needs and provides a numerical and percentage layout of children with different disabilities. The author also discusses the characteristics of the staff employed at institutions of integrated education, their factual competence and opportunities to obtain the necessary qualifications to work with children with special educational needs. Finally, the author presents the results of her surveys conducted among employees of institutions of integrated education. The respondents point to the difficulties related to the introduction of this form of education in Poland, at the same time stressing the necessity of continuing efforts that promote the development of integrated education, conducive to the so-called inclusive education in all schools.

Integrated Education in Contemporary Poland

The main objective of special education science in Poland before the transformation of its political system was the analysis of the problems of special needs children. This research subject was a result of education and social policy established by the Government of Polish People's Republic. Such policy had significant influence on social behaviors towards special needs people.

The education system of pre-transformation Poland limited everyday contacts of the "standard" children to the ones with equal to their learning capabilities. They were growing up convinced that the normal world is devoid of people with special needs. They matured not realizing that similar age ones with various deficiencies and growth difficulties existed.

In educational, psychological and medical literature, as well as in everyday language, traditional classifications of mental disability were commonly used. The negatively tinted names of the three levels of mental disability were: idiocy, imbecility and moronism. Nevertheless within the last dozen or so years one can notice positive changes in social awareness regarding the role of special needs persons in society. In the eighties thanks to the World Health Organization (WHO), those labels were excluded from the language.

The spectrum of research in this area of education has expanded to include not only childhood but the entire life of special needs persons. This group also comprises individuals who are sick and susceptible to retardation resulting from ailments, disorders or social conditions as well as the rehabilitation of elderly people.

An adequate education system for teaching children with special needs is a particularly urgent problem for contemporary special needs education. In Poland the system in force is partly about integration, but also partly about segregation.

The segregation system is aimed at children with an intellectual disability, children who are blind, visually handicapped with additional dysfunctions, and those who are deaf and hard of hearing with additional limitations. On the other hand, children with partial developmental defects, chronically ill children and those with the dysfunction of motor organs as well as children with learning problems or behavioral disorders are educated within the integrated system. At the level of upper secondary school, blind people, visually handicapped and hard of hearing and those with the dysfunction of motor organs study alongside able-bodied learners. Only vocational schools keep their segregation character, mainly due to technical and methodological causes.

A distinctive form of integration is special classes in schools for children with a slight mental retardation. It is also possible to attend regular classes in schools where an individualized curriculum is applied.

The idea of integration, otherwise referred to as integrated education for Special Needs children side by side with their classmates, is already commonly accepted, and it has become a source of both favorable changes in social attitudes and educational opportunities for the individuals in question. However, as K. Barłóg indicates¹, ‘while there is a common agreement as to the need for reform of the educational system in this regard, there is still a lack of material resources, difficulties in changing social attitudes and sentiments, a general lack of tolerance towards otherness which favors ingrained stereotypes’.¹

The Condition of Institutions of Integrated Education in Poland

The first institutions of integrated education were founded in Poland at the beginning of the 1990s, mainly owing to an immense involvement of parents with handicapped children, who looked for opportunities of educating their children in the company of healthy peers. Every year one can notice a dynamic increase in the number of institutions concerned with integrated education and teaching, which shows that this form of education is becoming more and more recognized and understood among teachers, parents and education authorities.

Table 1. The Dynamics of the Development of Institutions of Integrated Education and Institutions with Integrated Sections in Poland Between 1989-2010

Institutions	Number of Institutions by Year							
	1989/90	1992/93	1995/96	1998/99	2001/02	2004/05	2007/08	2009/10

¹ K. Barłóg, ‘Barriers and threats to the integration of disabled individuals’ (in) ‘Problems of special needs education in times of social change’ edited by A. Pielecki, Lublin 2002, p.36

Nursery schools	1	58	105	255	303	340	342	382
Primary schools	-	26	162	403	505	603	652	761
Junior secondary schools	-	-	-	83	166	218	289	353
Upper secondary schools	-	-	-	-	41	65	84	87
Total	1	84	267	741	1015	1226	1367	1583

Source: author's analysis based on reports from institutions of integrated education compiled for The Methodological Centre of Psychological and Pedagogical Assistance MEiN in Warsaw and author's research

The above table denotes that over the last 18 years there has been a steady increase in the number of institutions of integrated education within different stages of the educational process. The greatest growth is noticeable at the level of primary schools. There are also more junior secondary schools and upper secondary schools, which helps to ensure the continuity of education for handicapped children within each educational stage in a wider dimension.

Teaching Conditions in Institutions of Integrated Education

The realization of integrated teaching requires the institutions of integrated education to meet certain conditions, some curriculum-management principles defined by law. These include:

- multi-level teaching within the framework of a common curriculum, (a curriculum tailored to the needs of children as for the content and pace, individualized curricula, active methods based on co-operation);
- descriptive or descriptive-digital assessment, supporting teachers, and other specialists coordinating the process of educating and teaching (speech therapists, physiotherapists, doctors, nurses, psychologists);
- additional teaching aids, technical means, rehabilitation appliances;
- classroom arrangement stimulating the activity of special needs children;
- extra activities integrating groups, (e.g. those related to pedagogical therapy, sociotherapy);
- methods supporting both education and teaching, partnership with families (counseling, planning educational objectives);
- school support groups (e.g. supervision of the effectiveness of school curricula, protection of students' rights);
- reducing architectural obstacles (wheelchair ramps, lifts, improving bathrooms, preparing necessary facilities);

- close co-operation between institutions working for those with special needs, creating integrated groups comprising both special needs and children without disabilities in key with the needs of the local community;
- the recommended number of children in nursery school classes is 15 to 18; in school groups are 18 to 20 children, both of which include 3 to 5 children with varying types and degrees of disability.

Special needs children should live in the immediate neighborhood adjacent to their kindergarten or school so that their integration continues outside the institution: during a walk, in a shop, or in church.

Another very important issue is the architectural adjustment of buildings meant to accommodate learners with different disabilities. First of all, it is necessary to prepare ramps and wide external doors (so that students in wheelchairs can access the school via the main entrance together with their classmates) and installing a lift which would make it possible for students to move freely from one floor of the building to the next. Inside the building a number of various rooms must be thought of well in advance (e.g. speech therapists, doctor's, for re-education, rehabilitation and others, provided with adequate equipment), and also a front office, canteen and day-care room. In addition, school bathrooms should be renovated to accommodate the special needs students.

The height of some desks should be adjusted to the height of a wheelchair. All rooms should be fitted with wide doors and anti-skid floors. School corridors should be wide to enable wheelchair users to move around freely.

Notice boards of all kind should be placed in such a manner that children in wheelchairs could easily write on them and attach their work.²

Spatial arrangement within any integrated classroom differs from that of a traditional one. There are certain zones to be allocated:

- relaxation area, where a child can release emotional tension;
- area for individual work, where supporting teachers can work with a child using different methods without disrupting the usual classroom routine;
- the classroom should be equipped with appropriate teaching aids and technical means;
- special needs children should have an adequately equipped workplace

Learners with Special Educational Needs

Because of the existing tendencies of integrating the process of education of special needs children with able-bodied ones, one has to keep in mind the fact that schools will host more and more blind and visually handicapped children, deaf and hearing impaired as well as

² *The house without barriers*, 'Integration' July / August 2001, p. 11

learners with orthopedic problems, in wheelchairs, or even students with moderate mental disability. It is vital to ensure appropriate teaching and educational conditions, provide adequate teaching aids and rehabilitation appliances, books and qualified staff for all those students.

The number of special needs children applying for admission to institutions of integrated education is growing every year. Advantageous regulations in the educational law along with parents' increasing knowledge of the existing laws, and above all, positive experiences of integration have all made this form of education an issue of interest to many people.

Unfortunately, the institutions of integrated education cannot accommodate everyone interested and the supply does not meet the demand. It is estimated that the number of available places is three or four times lower than the ever-growing demand.

Table 2. The Number of Institutions, Integrated Sections and Special needs children in Institutions of Integrated Education in the 2009/10 School Year

Type of Institution	Number of Institutions	Number of Integrated Sections	Number of Special needs children
Nursery Schools	382	967	3911
Primary Schools	761	3340	13776
Junior Secondary Schools	353	1246	5495
Upper Secondary Schools	87	341	1489
Total	1583	5849	24661

Source: author's analysis based on reports from institutions of integrated education compiled for The Methodological Centre of Psychological and Pedagogical Assistance MEiN in Warsaw and author's own research

As delineated in the chart above, during the 2009/10 school year there were 3911 children in the integrated sections of the nursery schools. In primary schools the number of special needs children amounted to 13,776 and 5,495 children with special needs attended junior secondary schools, whereas there were 1,489 learners in upper secondary schools.

The majority of institutions of integrated education place children with different kinds of disabilities in their integrated sections. It may be concluded that these institutions favor full integration. The total number of integrated sections in different institutions is 5894, of which, 967 sections exist in nursery schools, 3340 in primary schools, 1246 in junior secondary schools and 341 in upper secondary schools. Compared to 2005/06, the total number of integrated sections grew by over 600.

The table below presents a numerical layout of children with different disabilities in school year 2009/10.

Table 3. Special Needs children in Integrated Sections in the 2009/10 School Year

Type of Children's Disability	Number of children	%
Blind	108	0.4
Visually handicapped	1546	5.9
Deaf	244	0.9
Hearing impairment	1831	6.9
Slight mental retardation	4912	18.6
Moderate and considerable mental retardation	1790	6.8
With diagnosed autism	1178	4.5
Chronically ill	3222	12.2
Physically handicapped	3555	13.5
With coupled disability	3516	13.3
With disturbed behavior, social incompatibility	4510	17.1
Total	26412	100.0

Source: author's analysis based on reports from institutions of integrated education compiled for The Methodological Centre of Psychological and Pedagogical Assistance MEiN in Warsaw and author's own research

An analysis of the data indicates that within the school year 2009/2010, the biggest group among integrated children in nursery schools and schools comprised learners with a mental disability – 25.4 % of the total number of all special needs children educated in integrated sections. In this group there were children with a slight mental disability (18.6 %) and some with a moderate and considerable degree of retardation (6.8 %). The second largest group, approximately 13.5% was made up of physically special needs children, 13.3 % with a coupled disability and about 12.2% chronically ill.

The number of children with emotional disorders, disturbed behavior and those socially incompatible was 17.1%. The figure has been steadily growing over the years. It is becoming a serious challenge for schools and teaching staff alike, because such children require a lot of attention and specialized support on the part of their teachers and the peer group.

The smallest group in the integrated sections analyzed comprised students with impaired hearing – 7.8 % and impaired vision – 6.3%.

'One may conclude that the system of partial integration used in the special - needs education in Poland meets the needs and abilities of learners with considerably limited capabilities. It also holds true in case of 'the uniquely baled' students, that is, those with special, but not pathological, needs and forms of adaptation'.³

³Z. Sękowska, *The evolution of theory and practice in special needs education* (in) *Special needs education and the needs of the present and challenges of the future*, edited by M. Chodkowska, Lublin 1998, p.26

Although the thorough research hasn't been conducted yet, it is commonly observed that the widely advertised slogan of full integration of all children, including mentally handicapped ones, does not take into account their real needs and abilities. It exposes them to stressful situations in the school community, making them aware of not only their own difficulties, but also their otherness, fostering attitudes of rejection.

Teachers and Other Specialists in Institutions of Integrated Education

The presence of handicapped children entails the need to develop the existing and to introduce new methods of work for teachers working with groups of learners with mixed educational needs. The necessity of providing the children with proper care and support in the process of education calls for improved qualifications on the part of the teaching staff. It is also vital that schools employ supporting teachers and other specialists.

Table 4. Number and Type of Specialists Employed at Institutions with Integrated Sections in School Years: 2003/04, 2005/06, 2007/08, 2009/10

School year	Supporting teachers	Psychologists	Speech therapists	Physio-therapists	Therapist Re-educators	Others	Total
2003/2004	2560	475	789	393	1104	601	6468
2005/2006	5745	637	1069	520	1108	795	10602
2007/2008	7268	640	1157	533	1222	608	12184
2009/2010	6654	719	1283	530	1379	915	11480

Source: author's analysis based on reports from institutions of integrated education compiled for The Methodological Centre of Psychological and Pedagogical Assistance MEiN in Warsaw and author's own research

An analysis of the data regarding the employment of specialists indicates a steady increase in the number of teachers with special pedagogical qualifications working in the capacity of supporting teachers. Compared to the school year 2003/04, the number of supporting teachers has tripled (from 2560 to 6654). The biggest group among the supporting teachers was special needs teachers – oligophrenia teachers (because of the predominant number of learners with a mental disability in integrated grades). Other types of specialists - psychologists, speech therapists, physiotherapists and therapists, are also becoming more and more numerous.

Table 5. Specialists Working in Institutions with Integrated Sections in the 2009/10 School Year

Numbers	Supporting teachers	Psychologists	Speech therapists	Physio - therapists	Therapists	Others	Total
Individuals	6654	719	1283	530	1379	915	11480
Jobs	5429	478	712	327	498	507	2951

Source: author's analysis based on reports from institutions of integrated education compiled for The Methodological Centre of Psychological and Pedagogical Assistance MEiN in Warsaw and author's own research

Specialists are employed full time and part-time – their hours range from full-time jobs to a few hours weekly – depending on the actual needs of students. Regrettably, this state of affairs is influenced by the financial condition of administrative districts. A lot depends on the negotiating abilities on the part of school directors (it may be worthwhile to consider organizing training sessions for principals in this respect).

Approximately 90% of all institutions listed in the CMPPP (The Methodological Centre of Psychological and Pedagogical Assistance MEiN) register employ a teacher supporting the work of another during classes in integrated grades. In some 54% of such institutions, there is a supporting teacher present during some lessons, whereas in 38 %, a supporting teacher takes part in every class.

In the school year 2009/2010, 7268 special-needs teachers (5675 jobs) supported special needs children during classes. Supporting teachers should adjust the syllabus to the abilities and needs of a special needs child to enable him or her to achieve success up to their ability. The type of specialists employed by such institutions is pre-conditioned by the children's needs. 719 psychologists (478 full-time jobs) lent therapeutic assistance and support to children at institutions of integrated education. Their help is very important when it comes to working with children with emotional and behavioral disorders, who constitute the most challenging group in the sphere of integration. All specialists assist in identifying learners' special educational needs, in preparation of individualized teaching syllabuses and therapy programs. They co-operate with parents of both healthy and handicapped children.

One should keep in mind that children who study in conditions promoting integration have various problems and developmental defects, which is bound to cause numerous difficulties in the process of learning and adaptation. Due to such phenomena, the necessity to train all teachers in the sphere of special education becomes evident. 'The teacher must be aware what abilities, capabilities and difficulties different non-standard children have. He or she should also know the teaching methods used by those working with the deaf and hard of hearing. In addition, such teachers should be able to train their students to appropriately use hearing aids, corrective glasses, magnifiers and magnifying glasses as well as instruct them how to make use of electro-

acoustic appliances in case of visual or hearing impairment or orthopedic appliances in case of a disability of the motor organs'.⁴

Teachers without specialized preparation are not ready to conduct such classes or use the above-mentioned teaching aids. Consequently, special needs learners in schools often have very limited opportunities to benefit from school curricula and fully participate in the social life of their schools.

School teachers can obtain specialized qualifications during post-graduate studies. The customary practice of educating special-needs teachers during teacher training studies is inadequate to serve the scheme of partial integration of special needs education in Poland. However, due to the enlarged scope of research in relation to students without disabilities, and yet functioning in society individuals, the system is still being improved, and even reformed.

We are still clearly lacking in specialists for corrective, compensatory, prophylactic and therapeutic work with children at nursery schools and learners suffering from cerebral palsy, with speech impediments and learning difficulties.

In many surveys conducted in Poland, the employees of different institutions of integrated education emphasize the same difficulties in introducing this type of education, primarily:

- lack of financial resources for both equipment and facility renovations required for working with special needs children;
- negative social attitudes: intolerance on the part of parents of children without disabilities, misgivings on the part of parents of special needs children, school teachers' low awareness;
- lack of factual knowledge and preparation on the part of teachers employed at institutions for schooling children with special needs;
- lack of qualified staff: speech therapists, therapists, specialist teachers;
- lack of specialized assistance for teachers of institutions of integrated education;
- insufficient preparation for children with special educational needs at the pre-school level prior to the onset of formal schooling.

⁴ Z. Sękowska, *'The evolution of theory and practice in special needs education'* (in) *'Special needs education and the needs of the present and challenges of the future'*, edited by M. Chodkowska, Lublin 1998, p.26

Conclusion

The situation of people with special needs in today's Poland is a consequence of how they have been perceived and treated before transformation of its political system. Explanation of this problem requires separate and detailed analysis. Most likely, in a dozen or so years, the social and educational situation of special needs people in Poland will change because of younger generations who were shaped, raised and educated after the political regime transformation. These individuals perceive the problem of disability, mainly interaction with special needs people and their position in society, much differently than other generations.

Regardless of the difficulties related to the introduction of the system of integrated education in Poland, an ever-growing number of children with disabilities are now educated in public schools alongside children without disabilities. Therefore, one may suppose that the traditional question of 'integration or segregation?' in the teaching process of the special needs children makes no sense. Considering these matters in their unity as inter-related issues, may bring forth some eagerly-awaited benefits for both children with special needs as well as for children without disabilities.

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