

From Segregation to Equalization: The Polish Perspective on Educating Children with Intellectual Disabilitiesⁱ

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Abstract

Previously in Poland, the segregation of children with disabilities was the norm. Recent changes to legislation entitled “Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities” specifically address the education of persons with disabilities. States are required to recognize the principle of equal primary, secondary and tertiary educational opportunities for children, youth and adults with disabilities into integrated settings. The education of persons with disabilities should be an integral part of the educational system (United Nations, 1993). This article reports on the education of children with intellectual disabilities living in full-time care institutions and provides an analysis of assumptions underpinning inclusive education in Poland. Specifically, this paper will: (a) introduce the history of education for children with disabilities, (b) provide an analysis of current legislation from 1991 to 2003 addressing education for children with disabilities, and, (c) explore examples of how education was provided to a select group of institutionalized children and young adults. In spite of recent changes to educational policy and formal regulations within the educational system, students with intellectual disabilities continue to be segregated within educational institutions.

Introduction

The idea of inclusion for students with disabilities in general education is not new. Kirk and Gallagher (1979) illustrate an inclusion program that began in 1913 for students with vision loss. “Inclusion” is the term used to describe, “placement of students with special needs in general education” (Lewis & Doorlag, 2006, p. 5). The authors use this term “to refer to the meaningful participation of students with disabilities and other special needs in general education classrooms and programs” (p. 5). According to the definition from Wikipedia,

an inclusive education refers to schools, centres of learning and educational systems that are open to all children, and that ensure that all children learn and participate Inclusion in education is a process of enabling all children, including previously excluded groups, to learn and participate effectively within mainstream school systems (Wikipedia (2007).

Winzer (2004) gives us the definition in which she sees inclusive education as “a system of equality for students with exceptionalities that expresses a commitment to educate each child to the maximum extent through placement, instruction, and support in the most heterogeneous and appropriate educational environment” (p. 43). Successfully educating children with intellectual disabilities is dependent on many factors including: type of the intellectual disability, depth of impairment, when disability first identified, clinical symptoms,

and interaction of different impairments. The most important characteristic, however, is the teacher's ability to develop a trusting relationship with students having disabilities.

Local and national policy frameworks directly impact the context within which teachers of students with intellectual disabilities. Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities were adopted by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly during the 48th Session on December 20, 1993 (Resolution 48/96). The sixth rule specifically addresses educating persons with disabilities:

States should recognize the principle of equal primary, secondary and tertiary educational opportunities for children, youth and adults with disabilities, in integrated settings. They should ensure that the education of persons with disabilities is an integral part of the educational system. (United Nations, 1993)

It is said, that nations should adopt equal opportunity policies for primary, secondary, and higher education of disabled children, youth, and adults, respectively. Nations should guarantee the education of disabled people as an integral part of their education systems. General educational authorities ought to be responsible for the education of people with disabilities in integrated settings. Education for disabled people needs to form an integral part of national educational planning, curriculum development and school organization. Education of students with disabilities in mainstream schools presupposes the provision of teachers with special education and other appropriate support services. Schools must make available support services adapted to meet the needs of people with different kinds of disabilities.

In states where education is obligatory, such as Poland, it should be provided to all children irrespective of the kind and degree of disabilities they possess – even the most severe. Special attention should be given to the following groups of persons:

- 1) Very young children with disabilities,
- 2) Preschool children with disabilities, and,
- 3) Adults with disabilities, particularly women.

In order to provide education to people with disabilities in mainstream classrooms, nations should: (a) specify policy which is commonly understood and accepted within schools and within the wider community, (b) allow for the flexibility of curriculum to enable teachers to add and adapt to meet the diverse needs of learners, and, (c) support teachers by providing course materials and professional development opportunities.

According to the 48th General Assembly of the United Nations, inclusive education and community-based programs should be treated as complementary educational opportunities. The result is an economical and efficient education system for students with disabilities. The UN argues that national community-based programs should encourage local communities to use and develop their resources to provide local education to disabled people. The document states that the quality of special education should mirror identical standards and expectations used in mainstream education; and, furthermore, special education should closely be connected with mainstream education. Financial resources intended for students with disabilities must, minimally, match those targeted for students without disabilities. Finally, the UN considers that governments should aspire for gradual integration of special education services with mainstream education.

However, Hobbs and Westling (1998) suggest that in certain cases segregated special education programs can be recognized as the best method of educating some disabled learners. When integrated educational settings do not fulfill the needs of disabled students, then segregated settings should be made available. Students who have multiple disabilities comprise the largest proportions in separate schools (McLeskey, Henry, & Hodges, 1999). According to Winzer (2004), to assist in determining the best approach – integrated or segregated – to meet the needs of the disabled learner, parents (or guardians) should be primary stakeholders in the decision-making process.

Methodological Assumptions

As society in Poland has changed – the result of high rates of mobility, an acceleration of transformations in different fields affecting people’s lives, integration into the European Union, and globalization, in general – causing a demand for research on educational phenomena. By learning about and examining educational systems elsewhere, Polish educators and policy makers can retain aspects of effective systems and introduce reforms to improve the educational system as experienced by students.

The purpose of my research in Poland was to: (a) describe the institutional forms of full-time care for children with intellectual disabilities, and (b) analyze regulations and practical solutions for addressing the learning needs of children with intellectual disabilities. This article reports on only one aspect of a much larger study undertaken in Poland on the education of children with intellectual disabilities living in full-time institutions. The following questions emerged:

- 1) What are theoretical bases of education for children with intellectual disabilities staying at care institutions?
- 2) How do formal regulations of education children with intellectual disabilities concern conditioning the equality in the access to the education?

Upon entering the research setting, I believed I would find that current educational policy in Poland, in spite of many changes to the educational system and formal regulations, continued to result in the segregation of students with intellectual disabilities in placing them in special education institutions. To explore these research questions, a variety of documents (eg, cumulative student files, school documents, teacher mark books) were identified and subjected to document analysis.

Selection of the Institutions

This research drew its sample of institutions from the Silesian province in Poland. All institutions were located near the border of the Czech Republic. This is a wealthy area of Poland with a well developing economy because of the abundance of natural resources. An examination was carried out amongst public and private (eg, religious) institutional forms of care for children with intellectual disabilities. Data for the overall study were gathered during 2001 and 2002 from seventeen institutions and included 410 children ages 1 to 25 years of age all having various degrees of intellectual disability. Data for this paper involved 382 students, ages 7 to 25

years (obligatory education age for mentally disabled children and young adults) from sixteen educational institutions.

The History and New Trends in Polish Special Education

To understand the current situation in Poland vis-à-vis the intellectually disabled, one need be familiar with the history of special education in Poland. The first teacher to speak about the need for education by people with intellectual disabilities was J. A. Comenius, of Czechoslovakia, who lived during the years 1592-1670. He said there was no poverty of the mind that the education could not bring improvement (Comenius, 1967).

In Poland, the development of an educational system for children with intellectual disabilities became very difficult following the partition of Poland during the Eighteenth century (1772, 1793, and 1795). Education was organized the by invaders, Prussia, Russia and Austria, with an intent to deprive Polish citizens of their national identity. Only after regaining Independence, following after 123 years, did it become possible to discuss development of the educational system.

Joteyko (1927) played a crucial role in the development of the theory and practice of special education in Poland. During the First World War, she planned the first projects to develop an educational system for students with intellectual disabilities in an independent Poland. Joteyko demanded that special classes be created as part of mainstream schools.

In the field of the special education M. Grzegorzewska (Żabczyńska, 1985) has provided the most service for helping aggrieved and disabled children. In 1922 she organized the State Institute of Special Pedagogy, *Państwowy Instytut Pedagogiki Specjalnej*, to train teachers in the education of special needs children. At that time, four categories of children were provided with the special education: (a) deaf, (b) blind, (c) intellectual disabilities, and, (d) morally neglected. Special schools and institutions were created organized by religious and secular organizations and the government. The state did not fund such institutions rather it subsidized institutions established by associations and self-government.

Types of institutions for children with intellectual disabilities included special schools for children with mild and moderate disabilities (these were sometimes boarding schools) and institutions for children with severe and profound disabled with a focus, on health-care, rather than teaching. The school system was very unevenly distributed with greater expansion in the western provinces and less in the south and eastern provinces.

During the Interwar period (1918-1939) the issue of professional education for intellectually disabled children was not settled legally. A decree in 1919 determined children be required to attend school from the ages of seven to fourteen years. The decree included children with intellectual disabilities if an institution of special education was located on land allocated by the state. Vocational schools throughout the country offer a limited number of special courses for intellectually disabled children. An experimental vocational school was started at the State Institute of Special Pedagogy (SISP) for graduates of special schools in Warsaw. At that time, there was no discussion concerning the need to establish special preschools. It is estimated at the end of the Interwar period (1918-1939) that about 12% of all children with disabilities (approximately 1 million) were enrolled in special schools in Poland (Grochowski, 1990; Balcerek, 1990, Gasik, 1990). From 1938 to 1939, sixty-three special schools were operational in Poland.

With the advent of World War II, important changes occurred in the field of special education in Poland. As a result of disputes amongst specialists, thematic instruction was introduced as the best procedure for teaching mentally disabled students. This type of instruction, with special textbooks, became commonplace. This period also saw an increase in the number of special education institutions and teachers throughout the country.

In 1956, a compulsory education decree for children with disabilities was passed. This decree led to the development of the 1961 Education Act on the educational needs of disabled students. This Act also directed disabled students to attend special preschools, schools and institutions. This Act sanctioned the segregation model of education. This approach did not change until the introduction of the 1991 Education Act, which created organizational norms for inclusive education and integration institutions.

On September 7, 1991, the lower house of the Polish parliament of the Republic of Poland, the Sejm, passed an education bill. Article 4 obliges every teacher to respect the dignity of all students. Teachers are expected to keep personal dignity and good of students at the forefront of their work (ie, to be concerned about their health, and moral and civic needs).

The 1991 Education Act also established public psychological-pedagogic diagnostic centres with adjudication teams to assess and determine the special education needs of children. These teams also determine the early intervention needs of children. Once a child has been identified as having special education needs, local governments (*starosta*ⁱⁱ) supported by federal funding, must provide appropriate special education.

A decree by the Minister of Education on February 27, 2003 adjusted the principles of education by granting long-term healthcare institutions and social institutions for the severely disabled the ability to provide educational services. Alternate institutions that choose to provide educational services must provide for children to complete homework and offer additional activities with positive therapeutic effects (ie, occupational therapy, art therapy, bibliotherapy, dance therapy, drama, music therapy, poetry therapy and play therapy).

According to the 1991 Education Act, special education services are required to be integrated throughout the educational system. Special education is an integral part of the educational system in Poland. It provides for education in all types of schools for children with disabilities on the basis of their individual needs. In other words, mainstream schools must provide integrated special education experiences for students. Surprisingly, the same Education Act states special education can also be provided in special segregated schools.

Compulsory education is in force for all children in Poland, including those who are intellectually disabled. Children enter the first year of school in the calendar year when they are seven years old. Children must remain in school until the calendar year they reach the age of eighteen years. The 1991 Education Act specifies that children with intellectual disabilities between the ages of three and six years old have the right to attend mainstream or special preschools. A child classified for special education can participate in preschool beyond the age of six, but not beyond the age of ten years. For children held back from school beyond the age of six years, the compulsory education of such a child can be postponed until the end of the school year in which the child will be ten years old. Normally these children will remain in the educational system until the age of twenty-five years. Classes for the severely and profoundly disabled are organized in public and special preschools, public and special schools public care institutions (education, health, and welfare), and at family houses for persons categorized for participation in individual classes with four hours per day devoted to group classes and two hours per day devoted to individual classes (ie, one-on-one instruction).

Findings

Segregated education issues for disabled learners

The situation for disabled people in Poland appears virtually perfect from a policy perspective however, from a practical perspective, much work is needed. Working within the recommendations of the European Union, Poland's solutions for addressing the learning needs of disabled people are multi-faceted. A multitude of different solutions joining elements of mainstream and segregated educational systems are available. However, a decree by the Minister of Education entitled "Methods of Organizing Teaching Children and Youth"¹ (Ministry of Education, Poland, 2003) provides a very different view emphasizing segregated approaches for the disabled living in institutions. A translation of this decree reads: "The teaching of individual students is provided based on the whereabouts of the child, in the particular, in the family home, in the special educational centre, in care centres for children"² (Ibid § 2 ust.4.).

The current legal and policy frameworks in Poland do not provide children with assistance to integrate into society. The potential of the legislation aimed at helping disabled children to participate fully in regular school life are typically hypothetical and rarely put into practice. When, and if, mainstream educational experiences are provided to disabled learners is dependent upon the availability of school resources and the pre-disposition of the school administrator. This is further illustrated in the Ministry of Education decree: "If the principal has the available resources, then he or she can organize extra-curricular school experiences for disabled children; in so doing, he or she takes the severity of the children's disabilities into account"³ (Ibid § 3 ust. 6). Attention needs to be paid to the unequal of access to education.

A second decree, "General Curriculum in Public Schools,"⁴ addressing instructional time for children in Polish schools further exacerbates the inequities between typical and disabled learners (Ministry of Education, Poland, 2002). The regulations specify a much shorter amount of time in school for disabled children than for typical children. The following are times specified for weekly instruction during the school year for disabled learners:

- 1) 4 -6 hours for pupils of the preparatory year of education (six-year-old),
- 2) 6 - 8 hours for pupils of I – III degrees of elementary school,
- 3) 8 - 10 hours for pupils of IV – VI degrees of elementary school,
- 4) 10 - 12 hours for pupils of junior-high school,
- 5) 12 - 16 hours for pupils of post-primary and upper secondary.

By comparison, average children are provided considerably more instructional time. Specifically:

¹ Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji i Sportu z dnia 29 stycznia 2003 roku w sprawie sposobu i trybu organizowania indywidualnego nauczania dzieci i młodzieży . Dz. U. 2003, Nr 23, poz.193.

² § 2 ust. 4: "Zajęcia w ramach indywidualnego nauczania prowadzi się w miejscu pobytu ucznia, w szczególności w domu rodzinnym, specjalnym ośrodku szkolno-wychowawczym lub placówce opiekuńczo-wychowawczej".

³ § 3 ust. 6: „W celu pełnego osobowego rozwoju uczniów objętych indywidualnym nauczaniem oraz ich integracji ze środowiskiem rówieśników, dyrektor szkoły w miarę posiadanych możliwości, uwzględniając stan zdrowia dzieci, organizuje im uczestniczenie w życiu szkoły (np. w uroczystościach okolicznościowych)".

⁴ Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji i Sportu z dnia 12 lutego 2002 roku w sprawie ramowych planów nauczania w szkołach publicznych. Dz. U. 2002, Nr 15, poz. 142 z późn. zmianami.

- 1) 25 hours for pupils of the preparatory year of education (six yearsold),
- 2) 23 hours for pupils of I – III degrees of elementary school,
- 3) 28 hours for pupils of IV – VI degrees of elementary school,
- 4) 31 hours for pupils of junior-high school,
- 5) 35 hours for pupils of post-primary and upper secondary.

Given the fact that disabled children have additional learning needs, the greatly reduced amount of time specified for disabled learners to be in school is inadequate. Although children are supposed to receive equivalent educational opportunities regardless of needs, school administrators do not have to provide for these needs according to the “General Curriculum in Public Schools” decree. This is simply not equitable.

The same decree suggests “The school principal should organize teaching as recommended by the diagnostic centres” but, as discussed earlier, the same decree requires school administrators to meet the additional needs of disabled learners only if they have the resources available. This paradox typically leaves disabled learners without the necessary learning environment and experiences.

Mainstream education issues for disabled learners

For those administrators who wish to find the necessary resources to address the needs of disabled learners in integrated classrooms, regulations only allow for additional funding for classes with a minimum of three and maximum of five disabled learners in classes with a total of fifteen to twenty students. The reality in most district elementary schools is that only one or two disabled pupils are present at a time. As such, a school principal would be unable to create an integrated class because of the high costs of hiring two teachers and purchasing appropriate equipment to meet the needs of the disabled learners.

According to Polish educational policy, all children living in full-time care institutions (ie, institutions for the intellectual disabled, orphanages, etc.) are subject to compulsory education. Inclusion of disabled learners into mainstream schools is recognised as the optimal method for integrating disabled pupils into society (Clark, Dyson, Millward, & Robson, 1999; Dei, James, James-Wilson, Karumanchery, & Zine, 2000; Hanson, Horn, Sandall, Beckman, Morgan, Marquart, Barnwell, & Chow, 2001; Hobbs, & Westling, 1998; Winzer, & Mazurek, 2000). In contrast, data gathered in 2003 in Poland suggest this is not happening. Of the 382 students living in sixteen full-time care institutions for the intellectually disabled, only 197 children had been referred for permanent residence at an institution by the courts because of dysfunctional family situations. Of note, thirteen of the children living in these institutions were not identified as intellectual disabled.

Table 1- Degrees of intellectual disability in students

| | Not classified as intellectual disabled | Mild | Moderate | Severe | Profound | Difficult to determine | Lack of data | Total |
|--------|--|------------|-----------|-----------|------------|------------------------|--------------|-------------|
| Male | 9 | 62 | 62 | 21 | 52 | 5 | 4 | 215 56% |
| Female | 4 | 39 | 36 | 15 | 67 | 2 | 4 | 167 44% |
| Total | 13 3% | 101 26% | 98 26% | 36 10% | 119 31% | 7 2% | 8 2% | 382 100% |

In the research conducted, no evidence was found to suggest that disabled children living in full-time institutional care are integrated into mainstream classrooms. It is especially surprising that children who were not classified as having a disability, and those with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities, are not integrated. The determining criterion was the place of residence - the institution.

The data in this study show that children who study at special schools or take remediation and/or rehabilitation classes do so where they live. They are denied integration into society and from having contact with non-learning disabled peers. The question comes to mind: whose needs are being met? Is integration into mainstream schools really for "special" children with special needs? It is not particularly comforting that integrated classroom experiences for disabled learners are only for those children who live with their families. Children who live in institutional care typically do not have access to integrated learning experiences.

| | Mainstream education | Postponing of the compulsory education | degree | moderate degree | Individual teaching | Individual remediation-rehabilitating class | Group remediation-rehabilitating class | Lack of data | Total |
|---|----------------------|--|--------|-----------------|---------------------|---|--|--------------|-------|
| Not classified as intellectual disabled | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 13 |
| Mild | 0 | 0 | 7 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 101 |
| Moderate | 0 | 0 | 9 | 68 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 98 |
| Severe | 0 | 1 | 9 | 14 | 4 | 0 | 6 | 2 | 36 |
| Profound | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 81 | 2 | 119 |
| Difficult to determine | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 7 |
| Lack of data | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 8 |
| Total | 0 | 3 | 39 | 83 | 20 | 36 | 91 | 10 | 382 |

Morris (1990) argues, “If disabled people are segregated, are treated as alien, as different in a fundamental way, then we will never be accepted as full members of society. This is the strongest argument against special schools and against separate provision” (p. 53).

Conclusions and Recommendations

Meeting the needs of disabled learners is not only the responsibility of education, it is a societal responsibility largely tied to developing social awareness and inclusive attitudes. Present legal solutions in Poland create a solid base for a modern educational system for children with disabilities. However, barriers include organizational and financial limitations. Attitudes supportive of integration of healthy and disabled children must be nurtured within society, in general, amongst educational administrators, teachers, parents and students.

In this study, children with disabilities living in institutions such as orphanages were not integrated into the mainstream. The cost of organizing integrated classes that include an additional teacher, special equipment, securing of additional therapy, transport to the schools, etc. often exceeds available financial resources. Even if integrated classes are organized at schools, children from full-time care institutions were not placed in integrated mainstream classrooms. This finding was repeatedly confirmed during this research.

It is necessary to provide education for all children based upon the principles of full participation and equity. Education plays an important role in shaping the future of every person, as perceived from personal, social, and professional points of view. The educational system must be central in assuring personal development and social inclusion in a place where children and young people with disabilities can reach independence.

For this reason, groups consisting of parents or organizations of the disabled need be integral to the decision-making process of establishing educational opportunities for children with all degrees of disabilities. Schools need propagate the rights of people with disabilities in order to dispel fears, myths, and misunderstanding. Schools should also develop and widely propagate educational methods that help all students feel valued despite their abilities or disabilities. Furthermore, others should value all students as individuals also.

As a special education teacher with many years' of experience, I recommend the concept of the organization of special classes in mainstream schools. The integration of small special schools within small mainstream schools will benefit both children with disabilities who can take an active part in the socio-cultural life of school and for the average child who will also have access to additional equipment and expertise available in the special schools (ie, speech therapists, physiotherapists, psychologists, etc).

The coexistence of two groups of children, average and disabled, in the same setting is invaluable. This approach teaches children to value and respect the rights of others. The commonly accepted concept in Poland of many pathways in special schooling already permits such a solution; however, in practice such a solution often does not exist. Perhaps such a solution will be acceptable to Polish teachers' groups in addressing the issue of segregation by integrating students with disabilities into mainstream institutions. This is a perspective supported by Winzer (1993).

Mainstreaming is a social experiment that continues to be more influenced by ideology and political and philosophical justifications than by empirical findings. In many ways the philosophical commitment is ahead of research and practice. Even as educators, legislators, parents, and others advance the notion, the manner in which the process will work more successfully has not yet been clearly delineated. Attempts to place philosophy into practice are not always successful (p. 384.).

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ⁱⁱ Starosta – a title for an official position of leadership, he is the head of the county (*powiat*) council (*rada powiatowa*), and the head of the *starostwo powiatowe*.