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Fostering inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities in early childhood education and care

NATIONAL REPORT

Author:



INTRODUCTION

The principles of education are governed by the law. The basic regulations are set in the Constitution (art.70), the Act of 7 September 1991 on the Educational System, the Law of School Education of December 14 2016 and Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities art. 24 of which obliges the States Parties to ensure an inclusive education for people with disabilities at all levels.

The Law of School Education creates an education system which provides an opportunity to learn in all types of schools and educational facilities for children and young people, according to their individual developmental and educational needs, as well as their aptitude, in the individualized process of education and care.

The Polish model of education can be called 'a way of many educational paths'. The schooling system consists of solutions such as special, integrational and inclusive education. The decision regarding the educational path rests with the child's parents. In the school year 2018/2019 4.8 thousand children attended special nursery schools. 'In other nursery schools and other early education facilities there were 28.2 thousand disabled children, making up 2% of all children. Most of the disabled children attended regular nursery schools (75.9%), 15.7% of which attended integrational nursery schools and 12.7% the nursery schools with integrational units¹.

FINDINGS FROM THE DESK RESEARCH

When it comes to the education of teachers in the field of inclusive education, time is of the essence. An answer to this this situation is the REGULATION OF THE MINISTER OF SCIENCE AND HIGHER EDUCATION OF 25 JULY 2019 on the national standards for initial training for prospective teachers of nursery schools and grades I to III of the primary school²,

¹ People with disabilities in 2018 Statistics Poland (GUS) [Osoby niepełnosprawne w 2018 r.] https://stat.gov.pl/files/gfx/portalinformacyjny/pl/defaultaktualnosci/5487/24/1/1/osoby_niepelnosprawne_w_2018.pdf

²Some of the subjects in the curriculum are: A child or pupil with special educational and development needs in a nursery school or classes I to III of the primary school – 14 ECTS credits. Organisation of work in a nursery school or a primary school with elements of the school law and children's rights and culture of the nursery school and a primary school including the education of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities – 7 ECTS credits. The issue of inclusive education is included in the learning outcomes, so are the rules for



special education teachers³, teachers-speech therapist and teachers conducting early childhood development class. It provides clearly defined rules of inclusive education in the curriculum of these specializations.

A sine qua non of the propagation and optimization of inclusion is the self-development of teachers. A teacher is legally obliged to continuously learn and improve their knowledge and skills in accordance with the needs of the facility they work in. The teachers' training system consists of units on the following levels: central, province, district and private run by a natural person or a legal entity.

The system also includes internal training and methodological counselling conducted by facilities, as well as internal training which purpose is to include the whole teaching council in the learning process encompassing the areas and issues that are important for the nursery school.

There is a wide array of available training courses⁴ available within the fields of inclusive education and working with a child or an intellectually disabled pupil, for example: (non-degree post-graduate programmes (3 semesters, the number of offers of such programmes is above 40,) training of the management staff, management of the teaching council, individual training courses.

Integration and including parents of both healthy and disabled pupils in the nursery schools' life are essential for inclusion to be successful. Theatre technique may be a valuable addition to widely used methods of working with parents. 'Performances' which use improvisation in an outlined situation where parents are actors can be helpful. Another valid technique is a discussion method called 'metaplan'. In order to involve the local community, it is crucial to reach beyond the nursery school's walls, to participate in the community's life, to spread the nursery schools' successes, accomplishments and cares in the forms of: festivals,

implementing inclusion, transcultural education, rights of the child and people with disabilities, ways of their implementation and propagation within the school environment and outside it.

³The curriculum of the programme consists of: core subjects; training in psychology for teaching children and pupils with special educational needs – 12 ECTS credits; pedagogy training for working with children and pupils with special educational needs – 12 ECTS credits; Inclusive education (all courses) – 44 ECTS credits; Training in specific fields of special education (all courses) – 84 ECTS credits.

⁴The research includes only the year 2022. Courses are available in-class and online. There are a several dozen courses available for teachers of nursery schools (in Polish). See

https://www.google.com/search?q=lista+szkole%C5%84+dla+nauczycieli+przedszkola+dziecko+niepe%C5%82n+osprawne&rlz=1C1DIMC_enPL888PL888&ei=LmmXYqnuEo7RrgTWw7noDA&ved=0ahUKEwipvbvFrYz4AhWOqlsKHdZDs0Q4dUDCA4&uact=5&oq=lista+szkole%C5%84+dla+nauczycieli+przedszkola+dziecko+niepe%C5%82n+osprawne&gs_lcp=Cgdnd3Mtd2I6EAM6BwgAEEcQsAM6BQghEKABOggIIRAeEBYQHToHCCEQChGAToECCEQFToECCEQCKoECEEYAEoECEYYAFC8FFjoqAFgz7cBaAJwAXgAgAH9AYgBkhySAQYwLjlyLjOYAQCgAQHIAQjAAQE&scli=ent=gws-wiz



exhibitions, parades. To cooperate with cultural centres, libraries and other institutions. It is important to exchange experiences and use the experience of others⁵.

FINDINGS FROM THE KEY INTERVIEWS

The outline of the group's demography

Eight people with experience in working with preschool children were surveyed. The group consisted of seven females and one male. All women conducted classes with children, one of them is a headmistress of a nursery school. The man is a headmaster of a nursery school and does not conduct classes with children. Two interviewees work in a public nursery school in a city with a population of about 20 000, three people in a private nursery school in a city with a population of about 18 000, one interviewee in a private nursery school in a city with a population of about 190 000, two interviewees work in a public nursery school in a village with a population of about 9 900.

The extremes of the interviewees' age are 32 and 60. The arithmetic mean is 41,1 years, the median is 38, the standard deviation of the population is 8,9, the mode (the value appearing most often) is 38. One could speculate that their professional life allowed them or even required them to form substantiated opinions on integration of preschool children.

The level of education: seven people have master's degree; one person has bachelor's degree in pedagogy of early childhood education. The aforementioned data indicate very good professional background of the interviewees if we take the criterion of formal education.

⁵SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS – BEST PRACTICES (available on <https://www.ore.edu.pl/2011/07/specjalne-potrzeby-edukacyjne-bank-dobrych-praktyk/> text in Polish)



The most represented time period of work in a nursery school is the one between 6 to 10 years, it appears 3 times, the period of 11 to 15 years appears 2 times as well as the period above 15 years, period of 2 to 5 years appears once. It is reasonable to conclude from the data that interviewees are people with average to rich professional experience. It is important, as the implementation and popularisation of inclusive education can be traced back to 2006. Therefore, only two people could have worked during the “pre inclusive period”.

The current state of inclusion

The objective, expository style is dominant in the answers. It points to “technization” of work. What is sought are tools of persuasion rather than child's development paths. Although, there are two answers that diverge from the rest: 'I'm a teacher who co-organizes the education process in an integrational nursery school. My tasks are: working with disabled children and adapting the teaching process to their needs'. '[...] Facilitating a child's development, creating a learning environment for children. Creating equal chances for each child. Facilitating the early child development – individualization of the process taking into consideration their developmental needs. Providing educational and psychological support.'

The fact that only one respondent answered the third question of the second part of the survey signifies the narrowing of the search scope. The fact itself is as symptomatic as the answer: 'The aforementioned issues were discussed during my initial education (studies), but during my professional career I learned to use specific methods.' It seems that the question was regarded as unimportant. It is also possible, however, that the scope of the issues it encompassed – four small paragraphs, could discourage the respondents from placing these issues within their education or courses.

All respondents have experience in working with disabled children. The following answers give an insight into working with such pupils: 'During early years of my professional career I worked with children with moderate or severe intellectual disability as well as with children who were profoundly mentally handicapped. The children had various disabilities: Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, genetic syndromes and others. The work entailed the appropriate use of specific methods, creativity and persistence in realising the educational goals.' 'I conducted individual corrective gymnastics classes with autistic children. Working with such children takes extensive knowledge, commitment and great patience'. The quote points to a crucial issue. Creativity, that is attention, imagination and commitment, is equally important as the knowledge of appropriate work methods.



Only half of the respondents consider themselves prepared for working with intellectually disabled children. 'Yes (I do have sufficient knowledge and skills), but I constantly look for new solutions'. Four negative answers suggest that the respondents are too critical towards themselves or do not feel extensively competent. It is reasonable to assume that specialised formal education (which covered issues of working with children with disabilities) did not equip them with tools necessary for realisation of this task.

The number of answers 'no' to questions six through nine is respectively: 50%. 62.%. 75% and 75%. It signifies a low level of knowledge. Reflecting upon the results leads to a few conclusions. Idea of inclusive education and methods of working with disabled children are known to the staff of nursery schools. However, the knowledge is fragmentary and, most importantly, focused on the current work with such a pupil and its technicalities.

Lastly, the thing most basic. An answer of one of the respondents: 'All people working in education, including inclusive education, face a very challenging task. Many people have to leave their comfort zone and abandon their paths of organising children's education. The process, certainly, takes careful observation, modification of the assumed goals and being open to the challenges that appear along the way.' It captures the essence of what has to be done to implement inclusive education and support the teaching staff. Otherwise, the process of professional burnout will significantly accelerate, and the feeling of being left alone along with the burden of additional duties will result in frustration. It will have a negative effect on everyone.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Inclusive education is being implemented in Poland. It is made possible by law and effort of many institutions, organisations and people. What is important here is that teachers, people managing education, politicians, academia, people conducting teachers training develop an attitude promoting such an education model. These beliefs have to be reinforced, cherished and developed. The best formal institutions and written laws cannot replace a human being, their commitment, live knowledge and work ethics.

The barriers to education still exist. Most frequently they concern attitudes, architectural limitations or a lack of: equipment, flow of information, staff training, teaching content and methods and the ways of granting and effective use of financial means for realisation of educational goals. Increasing the amount of classes on the subject of intellectual disabilities is the simplest way of improving the staff's training. However, new solutions are



needed as well. A Teachers Training School, already in the pilot phase, looks promising. This is a school in which prospective teachers will experience practical verification of the theory learned during their studies, and working teachers will improve their work techniques. The potential of schools and institutions is yet to be tapped. A student under the guidance of a teacher will face educational practice in the areas of education and upbringing and teachers will develop their workshop and share their ideas with others. It will facilitate popularisation of new and better solutions as they were created and tested in the field.

Many institutions provide support for children with disabilities and their parents. We should strive to coordinate their efforts on a regional level. The first steps have to be taken by enthusiasts but without the support from local authorities their work will be extremely difficult. The most vital thing is that the local community have the will to act . We cannot overestimate the role of leaders in this process and their ability to unify people around ideas. It necessitates supporting and educating such people.

The cooperation between local institutions providing support for disabled parents and their children varies in scope and application. Nursery schools, for example, often expect support but at the same time have little interest in developing such cooperation. The models of cooperation are lacking, the resources of institutions established for the purpose of coordination and cooperation, for example leading coordination-rehabilitation-care centres are not being used. Thus, there is a need to create such models. A network-centric configuration can be useful for establishing cooperation and facilitating self-learning.⁶

⁶ The issue in question is extensively presented in the publication: 'Substantive Report Inclusive Education in Poland - Opening Balance 2020' by Dorota Podgórska-Jachnik. It contains 32 recommendations for measures which will improve this kind of education. Available at <https://www.ore.edu.pl/2021/10/raport-edukacja-wlaczajaca-w-polsce/>(text in Polish)

