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Contemporary Educational Space for University Students and Young People With Intellectual Disabilities: Integration Through Social Interaction

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Abstract

Objectives of the research: The study focused on the influence that public spaces (scientific and cultural institutions, public institutions, and recreational spaces) have on the cognitive abilities of young people and their ability to stimulate interpersonal relationships. The main objective was to show the significance and educational potential of public spaces as a natural environment for the joint activities of university students and students with intellectual disabilities and the extent to which they support the process of integration through social interaction.

Research methods: This observation was based on the joint educational activities of university students from the Institute of Geography and Spatial Management of the Jagiellonian University and pupils with intellectual disabilities from Special School and Education Center No. 3 in Krakow; it was conducted between 2016 and 2022.

A short description of the context of the issue: The article refers to the concept of educational space and addresses the need to transform the existing

places of education, including those frequented by people with disabilities, in order to meet the requirements of the changing times and the challenges of the digital world. A shift in the attitudes of the young people involved was observed in relation to the space in which classes were conducted.

Research findings: Using unconventional ideas and teaching resources and modifying traditional educational methods and practical activities in public spaces are effective ways to break down barriers and overcome various difficulties and limitations, both for university students and those with intellectual disabilities. From the perspective of people with intellectual disabilities, meetings in public spaces enrich them with a valuable social experience, familiarize them with new situations, and teach them how to cope with unusual or unpredictable events.

Conclusions and recommendations: As a result of the research, it was found that a contemporary educational space should be distinguished by the following: natural and cultural diversity, communication and media accessibility, and the presence of small urban architectural elements conducive to establishing contacts and enabling a variety of circumstantial relationships.

Keywords: educational space, inclusion, intellectual disability, social interaction

Introduction

Modern education takes place in schools that have been structured according to the curricula and teaching methods of the previous century. The space for education should be transformed, bearing in mind functionality, the requirements of modern times, and the challenges of the digital world. Researchers have found that space contributes to categorization, which in turn has an impact on students' self-esteem and identity, which is of particular importance for people with disabilities (Gabel et al., 2013). The assumption presented in this article is that in order to facilitate greater use of the competences of young people,

regardless of their cognitive level of functioning, the educational space must be extended to public social/cultural places such as museums, cafés, and parks.

In the Public Space Charter (2009) adopted by the 3rd Congress of the Polish Town Planning Authority in 2009, a public space is defined as “a jointly used common good, deliberately shaped by people, in accordance with social principles and values, and serving to meet the needs of local and supra-local communities” (p. 2). Public places or meeting places can therefore be identified with inclusiveness, understood as a space dedicated for and occupied by various types of users (Langstraat & Van Melik, 2013). Inclusiveness is the possibility of including various social groups and individuals, as well as the possibility of making social contacts between different communities, including those related to different lifestyles and cultural circles (Mantey, 2019). Sennett (2009) argues that public places should provoke people to notice social inequalities, react to new stimuli, and have the opportunity to encounter dissimilarity in a positive way. Sennett (2009) describes this understanding of inclusiveness as vivacity.

The concept of educational space in the pedagogical literature has been defined many times (Tuan, 1987; Juszczak, 2004; Surina, 2010; Morbitzer, 2010). In connection with technological development and cultural changes, especially those concerning younger pupils, Morbitzer (2015) proposed a modernized understanding of educational space as “a multi-dimensional social space in which an educational process, including teaching and educating, is carried out” (p. 413). As the author notes, thanks to the Internet and technology, contemporary education has gained a new space – mainly an information and communication one – that reaches far beyond the traditional school walls.

In 2006, the educational space was defined by the OECD as

a physical space that supports multiple and diverse teaching and learning curricula and pedagogies, including modern technologies; one that demonstrates the optimal and cost-effective use of buildings; one that works in harmony with the natural environment; one that encourages

social participation, providing healthy, comfortable, safe and stimulating conditions for its occupants. (Kuuskorpi & González, 2011, pp. 1–2)

The need to “come out” from the exclusionary space of a special school can be clearly seen and felt by young people with disabilities, as they persevere in their attempts to eliminate communication barriers in order to participate in social life. The active participation of people with intellectual disabilities improves the functioning of a social community. This is confirmed by Chodkowska (2009), who says that “differences in individual characteristics and life experiences enrich the social life of a group and are helpful in preparing for functioning in society” (p. 13).

While discussing the educational space, it is important to take under consideration Inclusion Europe’s position paper (2011) on inclusive education, which emphasizes developing interpersonal skills and creating social relationships that are crucial in everyday life and future work. Importantly, the WHO recommendations indicated in the report emphasize that many studies focus on the implementation of integration practices (Heras et al., 2021) and do not analyze their effectiveness (World Report on Disability, 2011). This article presents practical activities for various educational spaces aimed at integrating university students and young people with intellectual disabilities. The results of the proposed and conducted activities are described in the summary of this article.

Random interactions between students and individuals with intellectual disabilities are not sufficient to make them fully aware of the limitations that people with intellectual disabilities face in everyday life. Only by entering the space of a special school, being together, and learning together in public situations can they perceive the surroundings through their eyes, feelings, and struggles with everyday challenges. Therefore, people with normal functioning should be included in the space of people with disabilities. Otherwise, they will always think from the perspective of a guardian, guide, or creator of conditions instead of that of an occupant, neighbor, or colleague. It is here where the attitude of partnership, cooperation, and mutual learning from each other can be developed.

Social integration and educational space

The language of intellectual disability contains many spatial terms. Students with intellectual disabilities are “placed” in special schools or integration classes, where they can be “independent,” “segregated,” “excluded,” or “included” (Gabel et al., 2013). In Poland, the terms for educational activities concerning non-disabled people and individuals with disabilities evolved into “partial integration,” “full integration,” and “inclusion.” Nowadays, the term *full integration* has been replaced with that of inclusive education to emphasize the importance of a holistic approach to education that focuses on the individual abilities of each student. The terminological considerations do not refer to the educational space of young people, assuming that this process takes place in a school environment.

Figure 1. The evolution of inclusion: partial integration, full integration, and inclusion



Young people of all ages with mild intellectual disabilities are educated in generally accessible educational institutions along with their non-disabled peers. Schools are required to remove all barriers which may prevent them from fully participating in educational activities. The aim is to introduce young people with disabilities to regular classrooms, but the integration process requires students to adapt to the existing, static education system, while the inclusion process requires the existing education system to be flexible in adapting to each individual student. In the opinion of the researchers, this form of education can bring about positive results, but it can also become a source of exclusion due to personal beliefs and values, legal regulations, functioning stereotypes, inappropriate relations, or limitations in architectural adaptation (Brzezińska et al., 2010; Chrzanowska, 2014; Mudło-Głagolska & Lewandowska, 2018;

Skalbania & Babiarez, 2018; Heras & Verdugo, 2021). As noted by Wlazło (2019), "inclusion is often understood as a form of deeper integration, which means that integration itself loses its basic sense of a voluntary and spontaneous interpersonal relationship based on the equality of rights and life (developmental) opportunities" (p. 46). On the other hand, young people with moderate and severe intellectual disabilities are educated in special schools with limited opportunities for contact with their peers in the process of education. The challenge for people with intellectual disabilities lies in coping with the requirements of the environment, adapting to a variety of living conditions and situations, adhering to the norms in a given social group, establishing and maintaining relationships, and satisfying their own needs in a socially acceptable way (Sęk, 1998; Zasepa, 2016). Educational practice proves that going beyond the school walls and experiencing real-life situations in public spaces is of great importance to the students' development (Marmola, 2016; Pietrzak & Sobocha, 2017, 2019, 2022; Sobocha & Pietrzak, 2017; Olechowska, 2020; Rahmawati et al., 2020).

By consciously organizing educational activities in public spaces for both young people with intellectual disabilities and university students, we can encourage simultaneous cooperation and individual development. Gajdzica (2016) defines it as a borderland space, but from the perspective of participation, not divisions, alienation, and isolation. For the proper development of individuals with intellectual disabilities, it is important to provide a multitude of stimuli that will allow them, from an early age, to actively learn and get used to and deal with the environment. According to Speck (2015), a poverty of stimuli leads to a lack of motivation to learn, and as a consequence, we observe a diminishing interest in the outside world and little need for independent discoveries. This vanishing of positive experiences of the environment, relationships, and contacts results in very poor or no developmental progress (Speck, 2015).

It is also worth paying attention to the advantages of using information and communication technologies (ICT) when working with intellectually disabled people. This is confirmed by the report on the "Digital School" program, conducted in 399 schools by the Educational Research Institute (Białek, 2013). The report states that ICT motivated people to work during

lessons, had a positive effect on maintaining concentration, stimulated curiosity, helped in understanding reality, and enabled individualized selection of speech therapy and therapeutic/corrective/compensatory programs.

The idea of holding joint educational activities with non-disabled people – university students – and their peers – young people with intellectual disabilities – was based on a query of the literature and common practical solutions. It was hypothesized that the social interactions between these groups of young people in a public space would positively impact effective social relationships and contribute to individual development.

The activities presented in the article are the result of collaboration between Special School and Education Center No. 3 in Krakow and the Institute of Geography and Spatial Management of the Jagiellonian University. From November 2016 to January 2022, the authors conducted meetings, workshops, and classes for university students and young people from a special school. The participants were young, high-functioning people with moderate and severe intellectual disabilities. The activities were conducted within and outside the school environment, facilitating the development of social skills and competences related to functioning in society (e.g., going to a museum, park, café, or art exhibition, or visiting the campus and institutes of the Jagiellonian University or the Nature Education Centre). These mutual meetings allowed the researchers to learn about the attitudes and behavior of young people in their natural surroundings and in public spaces, as well as to adapt the tasks to the functional capabilities of people with intellectual disabilities.

Expanding the educational space at the next stages of integration between university students and young people with intellectual disabilities

The aims of the educational activities presented below were getting to know each other, making acquaintances and cooperating at school, and then taking action in the public space. During the meetings, the important factors were the manner in which feelings were expressed, positive attitudes,

practical activities, and the involvement of both university students and young people with intellectual disabilities. It was important to use social training and act through experience. During the meetings, changes in the attitudes of the participants were observed depending on the space in which the classes were organized. The focus was on the influence that the space had on the activity, commitment, creativity, and interactions of the participants. It was important to analyze the emotions accompanying being in different places as well as the effects it had on cognitive abilities, strengthening new skills, and stimulating interpersonal relationships.

The aim of the school stage of the exercise was to develop interpersonal communication skills, improve self-control and self-presentation abilities, awaken an awareness of one's goals and characteristics, understand community norms, and adjust appropriate behavior to various social behaviors. At this stage, it was important to conduct friendly conversations, use alternative communication, and develop initiative in joint action and partnership, allowing the university students to become guides helping the young people with intellectual disabilities.

The educational activities in the social and public space took the form of regular meetings for achieving main goal of strengthening social competences. The choice to meet in public spaces was determined by the wealth of various social situations there, allowing the pupils with intellectual disabilities to independently experience, experiment, and explore them. Such places included cultural, educational, and scientific institutions, leisure, sports, recreation, and health centers, food and beverage outlets, public administration, transport facilities, etc. While visiting a place, attention was always paid to the features of a given space, the facility itself, and people working there. The universal skills practiced during each meeting were the ability to conduct oneself in public places (controlling emotions, conducting and ending conversations, asking questions, and convincing others), getting used to new situations, overcoming fears related to unknown people and places, following the rules of good manners (e.g., appropriate clothing and tone of voice, listening skills, ways of addressing others, and conducting conversations). As a rule, practice was required to cope with unfamiliar places, in such skills as asking for help and information

or navigating new terrain, which included locating public locations such as reception desks, cash desks, concierges, cloakrooms, administration offices, elevators, stairs, or toilets.

The motivation behind the activities in the third stage was for the pupils to become aware of their own self-worth and abilities, to enforce responsibility, and to develop the ability to draw on a diversity of individual resources. At this stage, the principle of “trust and authenticity” was applied (Pietrzak & Sobocha, 2019). It focused on strengthening, supplementing, and reinforcing the skills acquired. It should be emphasized that the goals were dedicated to all participants of the meetings. An important educational and communication space was the media space: the exchange of multimedia “letters” (during the COVID-19 pandemic). Video letters were recorded to present oneself and one’s interests, favorite pastimes and places, and questions aimed at sustaining relationships (Fig. 2). The young people participating in the classes had access to the main homepage of the institutions and places they visited and they willingly used them. The university and the special school websites were of key importance for learning purposes. These young people eagerly used ICT. The programs are intuitive for them, while the richness of colors and sounds stimulate activity. They enjoy the screen’s response to touch, as it gives them the opportunity to immediately learn the consequences of their actions (Sobocha & Pietrzak, 2017).

Figure 2. Young people from Special Education Center No. 3 in Krakow watching a video recorded by university students from the Institute of Geography and Spatial Management of the Jagiellonian University (April 2022)



The work described above created conditions and provoked students with intellectual disabilities to make contact with various people outside their home and school environment. It encouraged in them an attitude of openness to new acquaintances, assertiveness, and the ability to present their own image and inspired them to provide feedback and respond to the needs of others. In general, all the activities were designed to motivate students with intellectual disabilities to search for ways of spending free time, and most importantly, coping with everyday life activities. This strengthened the awareness of one's place and role in the social structure, including one's strengths and weaknesses. The participation of the university students played an important role in shaping social competences during the series of meetings in public spaces. Their task was to react, prompt, lead, accompany, and cheer. The importance of their role was also manifested in sharing their experience, providing inspiration, and giving support to their peers during the trips, meetings, and outdoor events. The aim of the shared activities was also to develop the ability to instruct and explain without compromising the autonomy of young people with intellectual disabilities.

Social interactions of young people in the public space

Young people spend many years in a familiar, isolated, controlled, safe, and predictable space created by school/university conditions. Despite a diversity of educational projects using various methods and techniques, after some time, creativity may be limited by the very existence of this permanent/unchanged space, shared by well-known and therefore predictable people. One way to diversify the educational process may be to expand the educational space and enrich it with social interactions (inclusiveness).

The educational spaces included the MICET Interactive Museum/Theatre Education Center at the National Sary Theatre in Krakow (Fig. 3), the Institute of Geography and Spatial Management of the Jagiellonian University, the Institute of Geological Science of the Jagiellonian University, the campus of the 600th Anniversary of the Jagiellonian University Revival,

the Nature Education Center of the Jagiellonian University, Police Station IV in Krakow, the 8th Transport Aviation Base in Balice, Kika Café Cinema in Krakow, Bielańsko-Tyniecki Landscape Park, Uroczyisko Skałki Twardowskiego in Krakow, and parks, playgrounds, squares, and local shops in the Krakow-Podgórze district.

Figure 3. Joint activities of university students and young people with intellectual disabilities at the Interactive Museum/Theatre Education Center at the National Stary Theatre in Krakow (June 2017)



These places were selected because of their educational value. At the same time, they provided an excellent area for the university students to arrange an educational space. The main goal of these meetings and group activities was to create a friendly circle of support and acceptance in the community. Mutual observation, based on openness and understanding, learning from each other, getting to know each other on an intuitive level, and gaining confidence and the conviction of a potential partnership were of great importance. When visiting a place, attention was always paid to the features of a given space, the facility itself, and people working there. The universal skills practiced during each meeting included the ability to behave properly in public places (controlling emotions, conducting and ending conversations, asking questions, and convincing others), getting used to new situations, overcoming fears related to unknown people and places, and observing the rules of socially acceptable behavior. As a rule, practice was required to deal with the unfamiliarity of new places, for example, using information desks or navigating unknown areas.

The work described above created conditions and provoked students with intellectual disabilities to make contact with both university students and people working in the places they visited. It allowed them to acquire new information, learn to use new devices, make methodical observations of nature, independently search for information, and practice asking questions. The personal characteristics and emotional and social functioning of both groups also played a very important role in the activities. Within the group of young people with intellectual disabilities were those with good mechanical memory and dominant concrete-image or sensory-motor thinking abilities. Despite their emotional lability, a need for social contact and an attachment to people, objects, and places were observed (Pietrzak & Sobocha, 2022). For university students, who were not professionals and did not possess specialist knowledge, it was the openness and spontaneity of direct meetings that created the opportunity to observe behavior and uncover personality. These interactions provided them with experience on how to react, inspire, play, and work together.

As a result of the activities and observations, it was found that a modern educational space should be distinguished by the following features:

- natural and cultural diversity
- access to communications and media
- presence of small urban architectural elements conducive to networking
- variety of circumstantial relationships

These observations are in line with the results of the Project for Public Spaces (2005), which identified four key features of an excellent space:

- It is accessible and well-connected to other important places in the area.
- It is comfortable and presents a good image.
- People are drawn to participate in the activities there.
- It is a social space where people like to gather and revisit.

The results of integration and educational meetings in social space

The first meetings were not easy. The people with intellectual disabilities found the need to deal with the new situations a real challenge, while the university students were concerned with proper behavior and conduct in the presence of their intellectually disabled peers. Initially, the people with intellectual disabilities found it difficult to adapt to the rules of the situation. They needed time to understand and be comfortable with the social situations; therefore, they required pedagogical support in making appropriate responses. The most common behaviors observed in the young people with intellectual disabilities were mood swings, hyperactivity, extreme fatigue, excitement, and an inclination to act.

As for the university students, the statements below provide evidence of their uncertainty: “at the beginning I was afraid that it wouldn’t be possible to get along,” “I feared the meeting,” “I wasn’t convinced to participate in such classes,” “we felt some distance at first,” “we were afraid of unpredictable behavior,” and “the lack of contact, as well as the experience of working in such a place.” From their point of view, the regular meetings resulted in permanent changes in their perception of disability. Other interesting statements were as follows: “the more times we met, the more I noticed that they were exceptional, open,” “it was nice, the students are cool,” “after the meetings I decided that I could work with such young people,” and “there’s nothing to be afraid of.”

For the students with intellectual disabilities, the effects of the classes in public educational spaces included the development of openness, directness, and courage in meeting with the students, as expressed in the following statements: “they like listening when we talk about ourselves,” “we get to know new people,” “we can talk about various topics,” “they listen when we talk about ourselves or ask us questions,” “we sometimes have the same interests,” “we spend time together in an interesting way,” “shared activities make us want more (we want to work more),” and “we get to know new and interesting places.”

The use of unconventional ideas and teaching aids, as well as modifications to traditional methods of education and practical activities in public spaces, have become effective ways to overcome barriers and cope with various difficulties and limitations, both by university students and people with intellectual disabilities. From the perspective of the latter group, the meetings in public spaces enriched them with social experiences, familiarized them with new situations, and taught them how to feel comfortable in the face of unusual or unexpected events. The variety of stimuli helped them recognize their emotions, while the multitude of events developed cognitive and social competences, strengthened their ability to build interpersonal relationships, and contributed to their individual development. There was a visible increase in the sense of self-esteem and the ability to act within the peer group. Thanks to these meetings, the potential future teachers, employees of organizations, project initiators, or entrepreneurs (university students) can realize the potential of people with disabilities, learn to stay calm, and intuitively choose the right solution when in direct contact with them, even before starting to work.

We propose a new understanding of the educational space as an inclusive, sensory and spatially diverse, media-friendly, dynamic, socially shared experience in which the educational process is implemented through interactions between young people with and without disabilities.

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