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## **The Development of the Idea of the Inclusion of Children with Special Educational Needs in View of Pre-School Education and Primary School**

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**Abstract:** Modern views on education have evolved to regard it to be the right of every human being (regardless of gender, nationality, colour of skin, state of health or individual capabilities) to education. In order to provide the best conditions of education for students with various educational needs it is necessary to create a proper climate for working with them at school and in the family environment. What is needed here, is: a) a coalition of all entities responsible for providing psychological-educational assistance for a child and, b) a high level of education offered, c) development of schools and kindergartens, which will properly satisfy the needs of children with special educational needs. In this process it is necessary to create the legal basis for such actions, a climate of social acceptance, preparation of teachers and other staff working in educational institutions and organizing conditions and situations for direct contacts and interactions of children of diverse needs and development capabilities. Mutual relations can be maintained in a climate of acceptance, understanding, joy and sense of one's personal development. Inclusive education is our hope for providing able-bodied students and students with special educational needs the sense of belonging to the same community, which is a school/kindergarten as well as to a globally organized human civilization.

**Keywords:** inclusion, inclusive education, special educational needs, kindergarten, school.

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## Introduction

The learning process of a young child, including those with special educational needs, involves the quest for knowledge, developing skills and accumulating experience. According to global standards – everyone has the right to full participation in the life of a society on equal opportunities. The right to education is one of the most important human rights related to his personal development opportunities, and thus the acquisition of the knowledge and skills enabling him to protect his individual interest and smooth functioning in society. Under the Convention on the Rights of the Child: “The Child disabled mentally and physically should enjoy a full and normal life in conditions that protect its dignity, enabling achievement of self-reliance and facilitating active participation in social life” (Convention on the Rights of the Child art. 23 point 1, Journal of Law as of y.1991).

Disability is currently one of the most important social issues of the contemporary world, which is highlighted by the biggest international organizations (e.g. United Nations, the Council of Europe, European Commission, International Labour Organization, World Health Organization, United Nation Fund for Helping Children -UNICEF, UNESCO). Among the many priorities of world and European social policies of different states, the education system in conjunction with the rehabilitation of disabled children and young people is becoming a strategy of conduct, providing them with the possibility of exercising their rights and participating in social life and the European economy. There are a number of legal acts pertaining to this situation, among other things: “Charter of the Rights of the Child” (1923), “The Universal Declaration of Human Rights” (1948), “The Convention on the Rights of the Child” (1989), “World Declaration on Education for All” (1990), “Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities” (1993), “European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms” (1993), “Declaration of Salamanca” - guidelines for action in the field of Special Needs Standard Rules (1994) and the “Madrid Declaration” (2001). During this period actions were taken on an unprecedented scale to raise

awareness about the problems of people with disabilities. For the first time in history it was shown consistently that the root of the difficulties of people with disabilities was not only in their own limitations, but in their relationship with the surrounding environment. All international organizations dealing with such issues pointed to the indispensability of new priorities in state social policies. The main objective of the created legislation is therefore to provide people with disabilities with the same rights and obligations that are granted to other citizens.

### **Education: law of all people**

In the above-mentioned documents a key place is occupied by the issue of education as a basic right for all people, regardless of age, gender, or disability. Thus the idea emerges of a preschool education and a school open to all children, including those with special educational needs resulting from a physical, mental, intellectual and social differences or child prodigies.

In European countries the idea of inclusive education is well known and has been implemented for a long time. The changes taking place in Europe led to the fact that many of the provisions relating to the opening up of our society to people with disabilities also appeared in Polish law ("the Code of Family and Guardianship" of 1964, the Act of 7 September 1991 on the education system and implementing acts to this Act). Poland ratified the "Convention on the Rights of the Child" in 1991 and the main legal act regulating the issues of social integration of people with disabilities is "the Polish Constitution" of 1997. The guidelines for the development of people with disabilities found their place also in the "Charter of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities" of 1997 and, as a result of these pieces of legislation, special education is an integral part of the educational system in Poland. These Acts focus attention on the equal rights of the disabled person to full participation and equal opportunities in society. With these documents the idea emerges of education for all children, regardless of the degree of disability: physical, mental, intellectual

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or social. This idea is based on the equal treatment of all people, given the proper education and support in achieving the maximum normal functioning in society. This idea has been given the term “inclusion”, meaning involvement.

### **The idea of inclusive education (inclusion) in pre-school and school education.**

Inclusive education is a relatively new idea that occurred in education in the 1970s. Initially, the concept of inclusion in education was equated with the inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream education. “Education for all” since the world conference in 1990, has become a major educational program of UNESCO, attended by most of the developed countries in the world (UNESCO Paris, 1994). The definition of inclusive education proposed by the organization highlights the fact that inclusive education is a continually ongoing process aimed at offering quality education for all and respect for diversity, different needs and abilities, appropriate expectations of students and the community to eliminate all forms of discrimination (Mitchell 2010).

In the late eighties and early nineties, the Ministry of National Education, tasked with reforming Polish education, placed great emphasis on creating an inclusive model of education and raising healthy children with special educational needs.

The challenge for contemporary Polish education has increasingly become the idea of the inclusion of an extremely wide group of people comprising the mainstream, those defined as children and young people with special educational needs (SEN) (Szumski 2013 p. 105). Educational policy ensures the implementation of the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, in particular with regard to Article 24 of the Convention, which obliges Members ratifying the Convention to ensure inclusive education at all levels of education (Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2006). The education of students with disabilities in schools and public kindergartens was

one of the main initiatives of state educational policy in the school year 2012/2013. In the school year 2014/2015 authorities implemented the state educational policy initiative on "Inclusive education of students with disabilities". Broadly understood, the idea of the inclusion of students with disabilities in public kindergartens was translated into the changes in the organization of psychological-pedagogical assistance and special education introduced, the implementation of which had already begun in September 2011 (Jaszczyszyn, Dabrowska 2012, p. 89). The change in understanding and recognizing the diverse needs of students has generated an increasingly complex system of solutions. This process reflects the changing education in the context of the education system: the model of segregation, through integration, to inclusive education. Narrow issues, connected with disabled students, whose path of special education used to be projected 'beforehand', today enters into the scope of readiness to accept and support the needs of all students, which is reflected in a broad, inclusive policy, i.e. involving education.

The presence of the idea of inclusive education in Polish schools is the result of evolution in terms of thinking and the accompanying socio-political changes that have been taking place for years (in Europe, the beginnings of inclusive education date back to the 1990s). Initially, the popular medical approach of placing restrictions on a person and excluding him from mainstream society began to be replaced over time by the social model, one which blamed inherent barriers in the external environment for the restrictions. Currently, under the so-called interactive model, both the capabilities of an individual student and the training conditions are taken into account. In the words of Zbigniew Wozniak: "The main reason for partial ability lies in the interactions essential for concrete action – in the interaction between individual skills / abilities and environmental conditions, in which the potential of a human updates, for which the point of reference for standards, patterns and social values and social expectations shaping the experience of people with reduced efficiency, which is reflected in the implementation of social roles and in the course of social participation (socialization)" (Wozniak 2008, p.83).

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The conditions of education which a school, kindergarten or other educational institution should provide at different stages of education, are described in the Act on the education system and the resulting regulations. The aim of inclusive education is to create an educational institution which would be able to take on, effectively educate and bring up all the children of a given community, regardless of their place of residence, origin, disability and needs. The development of inclusion implies overcoming many obstacles that may arise in a situation of children appearing with such diverse needs in kindergarten.

Providing each disabled child with the right conditions to grow, especially in times of crisis development, is an extremely difficult but important pedagogical task. Therefore, the pre-school period requires extremely responsible decisions in the education of children. Inclusion should provide a sense of belonging to a common preschool/school community to both able-bodied pupils and those with special educational needs.

The key aspect in the development of inclusive education is accurate and reliable diagnosis of individual children at an educational/preschool institution and then the development of the assistance plan and supportive actions aimed at the implementation of this support. My research and observations have proven that a teacher/psychologist is an essential person in every educational institution and that through their knowledge, experience and skills, the process of an inclusive education can be effectively implemented already at the very first stage of education. The early identification of needs is an important factor in the development of children with special educational needs.

The necessity of taking into account diversity has become a guiding principle in contemporary systems of child education (providing equal access to education for all students regardless of skin colour, country of origin, religion or disability). Phil Baylis believes that "inclusion is something more than integration. It rejects a traditional approach to disabled people, it proposes to recognize the phenomenon of disability as part of human experience and treat it as the focal point in planning services which are to serve a man" (Baylis 2002 p. 21–30). The theory of inclusion

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raises issues connected with the right of a child to attend to a public educational facility where they should be provided with the necessary support for the proper development, where they will be respected and valued for who they are. Every child should receive help and assistance, not only due to their intellectual or physical disabilities, but because of poverty, origin, race, nationality or social maladjustment (Zacharuk 2011, p. 2).

The presence of the idea of an inclusive education in Polish education is a result of an evolution in terms of thinking and the accompanying social-political changes which have taken place during the last two decades. Initially, the popular medical approach which located a person's limitations inside him, excluding him from the social mainstream, began to be replaced by the social model which blamed the barriers inherent in the external environment for these limitations. At present, as part of the interactive model, both are taken into consideration: the individual capabilities of a student and the training conditions.

Inclusive education can be defined in relation to: values, public policies or concrete actions taken by educational facilities. Among different terminology and meanings, Mel Ainscow (Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006, p. 5–6) distinguishes the following understandings of inclusive education:

1. Care only about people with disabilities: children and youth, manifesting "special educational needs".
2. Attention to early school leavers for disciplinary reasons.
3. Attention to the diverse needs of students, stemming from the problems arising in groups which are at risk of social exclusion.
4. Care of training conditions and preparation of schools to enrol students of different needs, which means creating 'School for All'.
5. Attention to the needs of all students, so-called 'Education for All'.
6. Care for the development of a system of approach to education and society.

These understandings can penetrate and complement or exist separately, constituting an extension of the idea of full inclusion.

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**Actions of an inclusive character and non-segregation education.**

The aim of inclusion as a movement and a social and educational process at the same time is to counteract segregation, isolation, non-accepting tendencies, as well as stigmatization, intolerance and discrimination against people with disabilities, as social phenomena that do not fit in the modern, humanistic culture. The ultimate objective of inclusive actions is therefore, preparation of children, youth and adults to live a dignified life in an open society and to take up actively various social, family, professional and cultural roles (Dykcik 2005). Such understood inclusive education focuses on one basic objective – placing children with disabilities in the school environment with healthy peers. Thanks to it, a child receives the opportunity to study in a local school, close to home. "Childhood of a disabled child, similar to fully-able child, is a world of subjective, individual experience, developed in course of relationship with other people. Because of existing barriers stemming from the child's dysfunctions, it must, however, build much more often a sense of satisfaction and make a number of attempts to search for the quality of their own lives. An important element of these actions is an acceptance, by the surrounding world, of his limitations and capabilities in implementation of his aims and effective performance of his tasks, as well as trends in attitude towards disabled people, including close ones" (Szymanowska 2010, p. 41). Undoubtedly, non-segregation education inspired by the concept of inclusive education makes an integral whole.

Special education is a way to ensure education for those students whose special educational needs cannot be satisfied by the normal education system. The system of aid and support in education of children with special educational needs gives promise to visible progress in the field of training and education. "Non-segregation education is morally right, allows the present school systems to fulfil the functions imposed to them in a better way than segregation education. Non-segregation education may have a wide range and high quality, if it is treated as a joined task of general and special education" (Szumski 2013, p. 96). *Special educational needs* – this term was made popular mainly thanks to the Report



of the Committee, chaired by Mary Wornock, which was prepared for the British government in 1978. The report drew attention to the fact that some children had visible organic damage which did not disturb functions important from the learning point of view, thus the authors of the report emphasized the existence of a large group of students who, despite the lack of visible damage, were not able to achieve the education program objectives. The term *special educational needs (SEN)* covers all children of compulsory school age who have learning difficulties significantly greater than most of their peers. Special educational needs – a situation, in which a student is not able to meet the school learning requirements without special educational assistance.

The challenge for contemporary Polish education is increasingly becoming the inclusion of really large groups of children into education in the common stream, children who are defined as those with special educational needs (SEN) and who are sometimes mistakenly identified with people with disabilities (Szumski 2013, p. 106).

Many European countries went through the transformation from segregation to inclusion earlier, therefore there is a considerable literature on existing practices in the area of inclusive education. The report *Teacher Education for Inclusion European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education* talks about the need to prepare teachers to deal competently with a diversity of educational needs. Also the definition of the term Inclusion was adopted by UNESCO and is more wide-ranging than the previously used definitions, focusing mainly on the issue of overcoming disharmony: special education versus integrated education. In this sense, inclusive education is the process aimed at providing high level of education which takes into consideration the diversity of pupils' needs, capabilities, individualities and educational aspirations and eliminating any forms of discrimination. According to the UNESCO guidelines, we can talk about three types of arguments in favour of promoting the idea of inclusion:

1. The educational justification – integrating education system should search for ways through which all children will be able to find their place in public school and derive benefits.

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2. The social justification – inclusive education is an instrument of changes of attitudes in society towards greater openness to otherness and protection against discrimination practices.
  3. The social justification – public inclusive education system is much cheaper than maintaining separate education systems, specializing in working with different types of recipients (Plichta 2012, p. 103).

The right to education in Poland creates conditions for education and upbringing and care, with regard to the age and level of development reached. The Act of 7<sup>th</sup> September 1991 on the system of education provides the opportunity to receive education in all types of schools by disabled children and youth in accordance with individual development and educational needs and their predispositions. Schools and institutions supporting the development of children should guarantee them educational opportunities so that they can fully realize their mental-physical potential and achieve results consistent with development potential.

Poland ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2012 and thereby declared that the aim of the state policy regarding education is the introduction of an inclusive education model. This requires, *inter alia*, changes in public education and, in accordance with Art. 24 of the Convention, in order to exercise the rights of persons with disabilities to education, member states provide them with access to inclusive, free compulsory education of high quality. Member states are responsible for ensuring facilities that are rational and consistent with individual needs, so that people with disabilities can receive necessary support from the general education system. For the education system it means abandoning the segregation model in which a large percentage of children with disabilities (not only those with the most severe dysfunctions) are educated in special schools. Inclusive education should be promoted, conducted in normal classes, in district schools which are closest to the pupil's life environment. This requires the preparation of schools to enrol all children, including those of special educational needs and ensuring special, professional support for teachers and head teachers. This

is a long-term and complex task, requiring the engagement of authorities responsible for schools and kindergartens, head teachers and teachers to implement changes and build up an organizational culture which is conducive to addressing the needs of all children.

In the last-half century in Poland there has been unprecedented, qualitative progress relating to the quality of life and rehabilitation of people with disabilities. These changes are evident in various spheres of life: education, employment, access to culture, art. They are inspired by different concepts: the social paradigm of disability, paradigm of normalization, self-determination and quality of life (Krauze 2011, p. 16–17). Without a doubt, non-segregation education inspired by the concept of inclusive education constitutes the central element of changes in contemporary education. In special needs education there is no other concept of similar theoretical or practical idea; departure from it may cause the stagnation of the education system of people with disabilities or special needs education.

Educational and social inclusion is the idea of the openness of children with special educational needs in the field of education; it refers to the opportunity of taking advantage of widely available and special forms of education, rehabilitation consistent with the type of dysfunction and to educational and therapeutic support. "Regulation of the Minister of Education directs the attention of people involved in the process of formal education, inter alia, to recognize and satisfy the individual development and educational needs of children participating in it. A collection of reasons of children's needs for variety includes: 1) disability, 2) social maladjustment, 3) risk of social maladjustment, 4) special abilities, 5) specific learning disabilities, 6) impaired verbal communication, 7) chronic diseases, 8) experiencing crisis and traumatic situations, 9) educational underachievement, 10) social negligence related to material status of the child and its family, the way of spending free time, social contacts and 11) adaptive difficulties caused by culture differences or a change of educational environment (including the difficulty related to prior education abroad) (§2.1)" (Dąbrowska, Jaszczyszyn 2012, p. 96).

Children are different, have different disorders, dysfunctions, habits and they need an individual approach. A key factor in teaching children

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with special educational needs is flexibility, which means a recognition that children can work at their own pace and the teachers need skills so that they can support their training process in a flexible manner. Inclusion means that the process of learning of each child is supported in order to get the highest possible result of each child. Individualization manifests itself in adapting to the needs and capabilities of pupils, educational and upbringing strategies, used in everyday work with pupils, in each class conducted by the teachers. In order for the objectives of inclusion to be implemented, engagement is necessary by all teachers employed in a school. The teacher should allow pupils to choose their ways of achieving the objectives and methods of acquiring knowledge and skills through adapting the pace of lessons, methods and forms of work, so that not only each student is involved, but also the work of the whole class is properly organized. Individualization is mainly a form of work with each pupil, including those with special educational needs, in each class and on each lesson.

### **Preparing teachers to work in a system of inclusion**

Preparing teachers to work in the system is a process of searching for new, innovative and effective methods to work with children. It is also a process of improving and acquiring knowledge by educational staff, enabling them to work efficiently with children. Teachers have a significant impact on how a child perceives themselves and how they feel in relation to the teacher and other children, because every act of teacher – student communication either strengthens or weakens the child's faith in their own strength. Any form of individualization regarding children with special educational needs should be based on identifying and exploiting the potential of children to overcome deficiencies. If the teacher allows the children to achieve success as far as their capabilities, then the children will have the chance for both general and educational development. It is also connected with a very important aspect of creating appropriate conditions for learning since the teacher should not only adapt

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methods and forms of work to children and their capabilities, depending on dysfunctions or social situation. It is also connected with the following actions:

- Adjustment to the way of communication with children,
- Extension of working time,
- Applying, providing and activating methods alternatively,
- Frequent reference to the concrete,
- Enabling multi-sensory cognition,
- Adjustment of the number of stimuli connected with the process of teaching,
- Varying the degree of difficulty,
- Clear delimitation of boundaries and enforcing compliance.

Only the properly organized process of teaching such children, psychological support and access to various forms of development of talent will allow them to learn as far as their capabilities. With the right educational work of teachers towards these children there is a chance of modelling their behaviour, attitudes, motivation on gifted students.

In order to ensure the optimal education conditions for children with diverse educational needs, it is necessary, inter alia, to build the proper atmosphere to work with them in school and the family environment. What is needed here is a coalition of all of the entities responsible for providing psychological-educational assistance to children and families, a high level of education and the evolution of schools and facilities which will adequately meet the needs of students with special educational needs. In this process, a direct contact and interaction is necessary between students of various needs and capabilities of development during classes at school. Mutual relations should be maintained in a climate of acceptance, understanding, joy and the sense of one's personal development. It is inclusive education which should provide a sense of belonging to a common community to able-bodied students and those with special educational needs.

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