



THE OPINIONS OF PARENTS OF DISABLED AND NON-DISABLED STUDENTS CONCERNING INTEGRATED EDUCATION

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Abstract

This paper reports the results of a study concerned with the problems of integration in education at an elementary level. 130 parents of students with various types and degrees of disability and 130 parents of students without disabilities were asked to provide feedback in this area. On average, the classes applied in the study involved 17 students without a disability and 5 with a diagnosed disability.

The tool used in research was a questionnaire comprising 7 questions combined with a certificate with supplementary information (age of the child, place of residence, type of disability). Parents and teachers of integrated classes also provided information in the form of a completed questionnaire. The parents involved in the research are residents of the Opolskie Voivodeship (county) in the age range of 30-57.

The research results indicate that the level of satisfaction within an integrated setting in education is higher within the group of parents of disabled students. Both groups of parents surveyed highly value the presence of two teachers in the classroom, as well as the chance to adapt the curricula to the capabilities of students with disabilities and talented non-disabled students, as well as the opportunities provided for the development of cooperation and mutual help between students. The analysis of research results also indicates poor knowledge on the part of parents regarding the system of integrated education and their lack of confidence in the educational abilities of children with disabilities. A small group of surveyed parents did not observe any positive aspects of integrated education, and stress that the crucial task of schools is informed by the work of teachers and the selection of students.

During interviews with parents and teachers in integrated classes, we can note the lack of social education aimed at raising public awareness with regard to the problems of disabled students. An important problem is also associated with the lack of awareness of parents of non-disabled children concerning the values of pupil performance in an informal integrated setting.

Key words: family, disability, integration, society

Introduction

The concept of integrated education alongside mass education has been adopted as one of the basic roles of the education system in Poland over the last few decades. A number of publications, studies and reports are available in this area. Aleksander Hulek is considered the founder of integrative education in Poland, and published a number of theoretical and practical works in this field.

One of the characteristics of modern education is associated with the development of

an integrated education system. This is due not only to the implementation of an ethical and humane social model, which numbers amongst its priorities a concern with the inclusive education of people with disabilities aimed at securing their active and complete participation in the society, where their subjectivity and autonomy are recognized and their social rights are guaranteed. We can emphasize that these rights arise from international documents, which include *Declaration on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 9, 1975. The

declaration applies to every person with a disability. Apart from many other factors, education forms an inherent element of this process needed for a person to develop, realize his passions and dreams (...).¹

The conditions for the education of students with disabilities formally changed following the reform of the educational system in Poland in 1991. However, only a few years later, when the possibility of enrolling in compulsory schooling in the integrated school system was decreed in 1993 and then in 1999 and when the document implementing the educational reform secured the right to education in a public school to every child regardless of the type and level of their disability, schools were obliged to provide conditions for inclusive education for students with disabilities². Any work undertaken towards integration should strive to meet the basic needs of children with special educational needs as well as their classmates.

The outcomes of this cooperation are subject to control by institutions designed for this purpose, namely the school boards of education applied as part of the evaluation of the education system. There are 115 integration classes in 26 primary schools in the Opolskie Voivodeship.³ After the visit of a commission whose task is to supervise the performance of the integrated setting in education, a report is drawn up and delivered to the school heads in those schools where the inspection has been carried out. It is also made available for teachers, parents and students. The inspection provides generally

positive feedback from parents, and students as well as teachers. Some of the opinions are negative, but the system in general is viewed as satisfactory so that more and more integration classes are opened. It is also beyond doubt that processes of integration need to affect the model, the program of teaching and learning in integrated classes, and therefore it is extremely important to share experiences and develop this system.

The assumptions of integrated education are very similar in literature on the subject as well as in ministerial assumptions. These include:

- the integrated system is designed to bring children with different educational needs together and allow them to cooperate and learn from each other,
- it is recognized that the work of teachers in an integrated setting has to be concerned with support and work with a child in accordance with their individual needs,
- every child with a disability at school age, irrespective of their abilities, needs to be given an opportunity to attend a class that is adequate for their age, in a school located in the vicinity of where they live (i.e. a school attended by their non-disabled peers) and support should be offered to them, as well as to their family and teachers.

While literature in the area contains reports on integration at various stages of education, there has been little focus on the opinions of the participants of this education system – including parents and students.

Aim and scope

The aim adopted in the work involved the sampling and study of feedback gained from 126 parents of children with disabilities, as well as 132 parents of students without disabilities regarding the integrated setting provided for their children in primary schools. The research is typically informative based on the statements of people using integrated education, as well as the people who have developed it.

Questions

The study aims to provide answers to the following questions:

¹ www.problemy.edukacji.us.edu.pl – Wiesława Walkowska, Bartosz Gągorowski, *Założenia i bariery kształcenia integracyjnego* – October 8, 2017.

² J. Charańska – Blachucik, K. Piechota, *Uczniowie ze specjalnymi potrzebami edukacyjnymi a kształcenie kadry nauczycielskiej*, [In:] *Interdyscyplinarność i transdyscyplinarność w procesie kształcenia w szkole wyższej*, red. Ż. Kaczmarek, Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, Toruń 2015, p. 204, Decree of February 15, 1999 outlining a new educational system reform, *Journal of Laws* no. 9, item 36), cf. I. Chrzanowska, *Pedagogika specjalna. Od tradycji do współczesności*, Impuls Kraków 2015, p. 535.

³ Kuratorium Oświaty w Opolu - dane pochodzą z Systemu Informacji Oświatowej wg stanu na dzień 30 września 2017 r.

1. Are the parents of students without disabilities satisfied with integrated education?
2. Are the parents of students with disabilities satisfied with integrated education?

Materials and methods

The study was carried out among parents of primary school children in May, June and September 2017 in the Opolskie Voivodeship. A detailed analysis of the research provided information about the performance of integrated classes in the Opolskie Voivodeship. The research material could then be used to improve the quality of the primary school system with regard to the scope of the research that was carried out.

The survey technique was used as the basic research tool for the above purposes and oral interviews were carried out to provide parents and teachers with an additional opportunity to complement the results of the surveys. The entire material was compiled using the qualitative method (in the case of data derived from interviews) and the quantitative method (in data from surveys). The qualitative and quantitative methods that have been applied provide a comprehensive set of results with regard to the possibilities of improving the performance of integrated classes, as well as demonstrating that there is the need to create more of them as a result of the growing number of children with disabilities. Spoken reports from the teachers of integrated classes and their assistants teachers who guide students through difficulties in learning provide valuable sources of information with regard to both the shortcomings and the positive aspects of the integrated education setting.

Structure of study

Successful efforts were made to contact and interview parents of children attending 26 integrated classes in public schools. The research was carried out for cognitive purposes, among a total number of 258 parents. Each group received a questionnaire containing the same questions. A problem that arose in analysis concerned with the number of parents of children without disabilities, since on average there are 5 students in one integrated class certified with

special educational needs, constituting one third of the class. On average, there are 17 students without disabilities in a class, which means that there 442 parents were to be contacted, and as a result, the ratio of both groups could be incompatible for further calculations and analysis.

Due to the fact that the research was performed in schools during regular meetings attended by the parents and that not every survey was completed correctly, the present analysis applied 130 questionnaires completed by parents of students with disabilities and the same number of parents of students without disabilities. The study consisted of 258 written and oral feedback questionnaires provided by the parents. Due to the fact that during the research it was possible also to access teachers, they were asked for their own opinions and for an indication of the strengths and weaknesses of this type of education.

Anonymity was requested by the parents, and consent was granted for the analysis of the results and information concerning the interviewees approached during the research.

Analysis of results

Reasons for parental satisfaction with the integrated setting

Through analyzing the results of research aimed at learning the opinions of 126 parents of children with disabilities and 132 parents of students without disability regarding integrated activities conducted for their children in primary schools, a slight discrepancy between the opinions of the two groups can be noted. The results suggest that more than half of 204 parents are fully satisfied with the performance of integrated education, and that expectations were not fulfilled in the opinion of 56 parents. Among all parents, the number of those who hesitated but noted the progress made by the school system in terms of integrated education is equal to 40. This result was established on the basis of interviews with parents who support the organization of integrated classes, but are unwilling to send the child to an integrated education class in the given school.

However, the smallest ratio of interviewees is made up by parents, whose expectations are

not fully satisfied and who note deficiencies in the performance of this type of education system. Their opinions are valuable for the

further improvement of the quality of work in such classes.

Table 1. Reasons for parental satisfaction with the performance of integrated classes. The list is organized in accordance with the order of parents' preferences.

No.	Reasons for parents to send their children to integrated classes	Number of parents of pupils without disability N = 132	Number of parents of pupils with disability N = 126	TOTAL N = 258
A	class is supervised by two teachers (improved discipline, stability during classes)	119	125	244
B	school curriculum is adapted to the needs of both children with and without disabilities	107	130	237
C	children learn from each other the values of: help, modesty, tolerance, cooperation, friendliness, etc.	98	104	202
D	my child improved their functioning within their peer group (has friends, acquaintances)	53	136	189
E	children acquire social skills (communication, personal culture, meeting other people, etc.)	76	81	177
F	only teachers with a specialization are involved in the education (specialist and therapeutic teams)	62	101	163
G	courses are taught by experienced teachers (including those who have long work experience, or have held multiple roles as class tutors, etc.)	78	72	150
H	the school has a variable teaching offer, educational and tourist activities	58	71	129
I	my child has a certificate concerning special educational needs and it is a good solution for them to function among students without disabilities	0	120	120
J	my child attended an integrated pre-school, so school forms the follow-up stage of this type of integration	31	88	119
K	other opinions provided by parents: - the integrated education system fulfills a current need and the effects are visible, - children are better prepared to interact with another person who has the same needs as everyone else; - children with disabilities want to show their skills in front of other students; - children support each other more and are likely to help and form peer groups; - the atmosphere in integrated classes depends on the teachers.	38	76	114

There are a lot of reasons why parents enroll children in integrated classes; one reason is associated with the feeling of security and care resulting from the presence of two teachers in the classroom, in particular in the

group for parents of children with disabilities. As many as 125 parents of students with disabilities took the decision to register a child in integrated education due to this reason (table 1). Some of the opinions offer the

conclusion that the roles adopted by the teacher and assistant teacher may not meet the parents' expectations in every case. However, in this group, 244 interviewees consider this aspect as the greatest advantage of integrated schools.

The second important reason suggested by the parents who choose this type of education is associated with a curriculum that is adapted to the students' needs and includes the need to acquire a suitable level of work organization by the student. All of the surveyed parents of children with disabilities supported this opinion - 126, whereas for parents with children without disabilities, the number was 107. During discussions and interviews, the parents were tempted to identify certain gaps in this form of organizing integrated education. This statement takes into account feedback gained from parents of students without disabilities regarding the suitability of the school curriculum to the needs of average students and those with learning difficulties.

Students with exceptional skills and abilities and knowledge often enjoy extracurricular activities, sometimes outside school or at home, at the expense of their free time. They are often ready to prepare to participate in the 'Knowledge Olympics' or Competitions at home or with the teacher on their days off and during various projects organized by schools. Parents dislike the fact that gifted students cannot develop their special talents or abilities during lessons at school.

Among the list of reasons and positive remarks listing the positive effects of this form of education, we can observe the emphasis on benefits resulting from social aspects, which form some of the principal goals of integrated education. In the opinions of 98 parents of students without disabilities and 104 parents of students with disabilities, students acquire certain values from each other such as help, modesty, tolerance, cooperation, collegiality, etc. This is confirmed by a total number of 202 similar opinions. Similar effects were reported by the parents, including 189 opinions regarding the improved performance of children in the peer group, and offering the

conclusion that pupils acquire general as well as basic social skills, according to 177 interviewees. For the most part, parents of children with disabilities positively perceive the work of specialist and therapeutic teams in their schools. Over half of these - 101 parents and 62 parents of children without disabilities - note the successes of the tutorial team. These opinions form very valuable input since such teams are able to adopt the program, conditions, and organize activities so that children with dysfunctions can use them as much as possible and learn about what they can do and what they cannot do. The Individual Program of Education and Therapy (IPET) is developed to suit a student's needs on the basis of certified special educational needs, which contains a list of the student's strengths and weaknesses and lists possible further approaches to their work. In addition, a social environmental diagnosis and an overview of the child's needs and abilities, through which the student can achieve success, has also been drawn up from September 2017. In the opinions of 78 parents of students without disabilities and 72 parents of children with disabilities, subjects are taught by experienced teachers. We can add here that the role of the main teacher is taken on by teachers who often do not have the training to work with students with special educational needs and disabilities, which also means that the supporting teacher is often left to struggle with a huge burden. Schools with integrated classes have many offers for students, including for example, trips, bonfires, special events, sports competitions, performances, etc. Remarks regarding such offers are listed in 58 surveys submitted by parents of students without disabilities and 71 parents of students with disabilities.

Following tests are performed in a psychological – pedagogical counseling center, students with various types and levels of disability receive a certificate regarding special education. However, it is their parents who choose the school and the type of educational environment for their children, and select whether their children participate in integrated or special education. This information was

obtained from 120 parents of children certified for special education. In this group there are 10 parents who think that this certificate should not have been issued to their children despite symptoms suggesting some degree of disability. For the majority of children following the integrated program to early childhood education, a school comprising integrated classes forms a follow-up from early education, and this pertains both to children with and without disabilities (88 and 31, respectively).

Reasons for parental dissatisfaction with integrated classes

Table 2 contains information gained from the parents summarizing the details of parental dissatisfaction with the performance of integrated classes. The feedback gained from the parents is in general similar to the results reported in studies concerned with problems in integrated education.

This list includes - among other issues - student exposure to inadequate learning settings, including: too many students requiring individual care, a lack of sufficient attention paid to gifted students, teaching staff with insufficient skills, too few teachers present in an integrated education class, too few specialists and the inappropriate attitude of teachers to students. In general, the number of parents who express dissatisfaction with the performance of integrated education is considerably smaller than those who are satisfied with the present system.

The approach that is assumed by those parents dissatisfied with the performance of integrated classes is perceived very positively by the general public, because on the basis of the suggestions provided by such parents it is possible to further develop and improve the system of integrated education and meet the expectations of parents and their children. The common denominator of integrated classes is concerned with the activities undertaken to the benefit of children with and without disabilities. There are also students with disabilities who demand a greater level of supervision from teachers, tutors or assistant teachers during the students' time at school. Sometimes these problems are very serious and there are

circumstances where particular students cannot not find their place in the school setting. The behaviors demonstrated by such students lead to class disruption, which adversely affects high-performing students and those without disabilities. We can provide the following description of a situation involving such a student and related conflict as an example:

In the integrated class there is a student with autism and diagnosed mental incapacity all combined with being aggressive, self-harming and susceptible to various kinds of noisy stimuli, which result in the child responding with attacks of anger and attempts to run away. As a result, students within the range of standard development demonstrate reactions of fear and anxiety just as if they faced an attacker, and not a friend or classmate. And that is why, the school and this class are becoming dangerous for students, and parents are dissatisfied with the performance of this institution.

Among the types of disabilities that do not pose a threat can be included those which do not entail a diagnosed level of autism. Students with moderate and severe intellectual disabilities are granted individual hours of classes, and some only attend classes in subjects such as physical education, music, art and religion. These students do not pose such a threat as students with mental disabilities. Some of the diagnosed disabilities that are safe in everyday contact and do not pose a threat to the environment include motor disability (blindness and visual impairment, deafness and hearing loss, limb amputation or birth without part of the upper or lower limbs), somatic disorders, speech disorders, chronic illnesses and intellectual disability up to a light degree and even to a moderate or significant degree in many cases. The students in these categories seldom participate in integrated activities, as they often enjoy individual teaching. Students with Down syndrome are rarely reported to have disagreements, and we also distinguish different types of conjugate disabilities that do not interfere with normal life at school. Students with psychomotor hyperactivity and difficulties in concentration do

not pose a threat to the environment but demand attention from teachers. The reason is associated with the need to diversify the tasks every 10 minutes throughout the entire lesson.

The conclusions from this analysis suggest that students without disabilities in integrated classes, especially in the 7th and

8th grades of elementary school, and in classes I and II of the gymnasium (middle school) in the former education system also demonstrate the characteristics of friendliness and tolerance towards their disabled classmates.

Table 2. Reasons for parental dissatisfaction with integrated education

No.	Reasons for parental dissatisfaction with integrated classes	Number of parents of pupils without disability N = 132	Number of parents of pupils with disabilities N = 126	TOTAL N = 258
A	the number of children requiring individual care is too high (1 to 1)	85	15	100
B	unsuitable teachers (lack of empathy, patience, sympathy, communication)	64	33	97
C	inadequate attitude of teachers to students	62	35	97
D	a child with disabilities will never get the same results in learning as a child without disability	30	Parents with students with disabilities suggest that the word 'results' be replaced with 'progress' 57	87
E	Incorrect selection of students with and without disabilities	38	41	79
F	low levels of teaching non-disabled students	73	0	73
G	insufficient attention paid to students without disabilities	47	5	52
H	unskilled teaching and specialist staff	19	26	35
I	my child is not prepared to perform well in an integrated class	8	12	20
J	in addition to feelings and sensitivity to others, the pupils will not learn anything	18	0	18
K	- there is no possibility of working with a child who is high functioning but has an autistic spectrum of disorders - the tasks of an integrated class take away learning time from the better students, that is, we take the chances of some to give them to others	42	16	58

Conclusion

On the basis of the research carried out in the Opolskie Voivodeship, we can establish that integrated education meets the expectations of parents, but that it is necessary to close the

existing gaps and oversight. The basic reason for dissatisfaction is associated with inadequate selection of students for integrated classes, and the lack of parental awareness regarding the educational and scientific benefits resulting from the activities of

integrated classes. Sometimes, there are cases of integrated classes in which five students require permanent supervision. This is much of a burden for the teachers and such circumstances form an impediment in the work of other students. If a teacher needs to deal with one of the students, they are unable to cater for the needs of others. For the most part, such students need help during various activities, such as changing into a sports outfit for a physical education lesson. The expectations of parents regarding the student's performance in the classroom are too high for a school, as it is not capable of meeting them. In some schools and classes, there are assistant teachers who can help in some activities. In this case, special schools form an alternative to integrated schools, as the program in them is adapted to the students' capabilities, but only children with intellectual and multiple disabilities are eligible for this type of institution.

Another reason for poor results is associated with the lack of adequately trained teaching staff, for instance of skilled professional to play the role of assistant teacher. Often, these people do not have training in the area, and in accordance with the law under the current Labor Code, they can perform such a function.

Another type of obstacle is associated with the variety of disabilities and other disabilities that are not revealed by parents to school authorities, which poses a problem in the selection of students in a class. On one hand, this is understandable, as parents are not likely to admit that their child is disabled, and on the other hand it poses a challenge for class and school organization. Such parents do not realize, or do not want to know that this can do harm to their child and the environment in which they function. Only after the child is subjected to a comprehensive pedagogical and psychological diagnosis, can appropriate knowledge be made available to parents regarding help and work with the child, including knowledge of the child's strengths and weaknesses. In this manner, parents could receive practical tips and support.

Sometimes a case may also arise in which a parent cannot note any positive aspects of their son or daughter's disability.

On the basis of an analysis of the answers to individual questions from the surveys and interviews we can learn a great deal about the atmosphere at school; about the teachers' willingness to cooperate and engage in work with students and parents, about the duty of sharing ways of looking for help and their outcomes. It would be worthwhile to conduct research on students of integrated classes at various levels of education.

The material that was collected helped with answering the following questions and concerns:

1. Are parents of children without disabilities satisfied with integrated education?

In general, we can say that they are satisfied and the schools meet their expectations, but they have some concerns about the teachers' work with their children.

2. Are parents of children with disabilities satisfied with integrated education?

This group of parents has several educational options to choose from. The child can attend any general class, integrated class and special school. Parents can choose the school depending on the type of disability. The parents reviewed are satisfied with the available alternatives of integrated classes, but also provide suggestions and propositions regarding the possibilities of improving the performance of the system.

3. What types of disabilities are accepted in education?

There is a large number of students who do not pose a threat to other students in the classroom, e.g. ones with intellectual disability up to a moderate degree, ones with physical disabilities, some individuals with mental disorders with high-functioning autism, some cases of Asperger's syndrome, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, as well as with chronic diseases.

4. What types of disabilities are problematic or even harmful to the system of integrated education?

Some students with mental disorders: autism, behavioral disorders – aggression with multiple disabilities can form a threat.

5. Do integrated classes entirely fulfill parents' expectations?

In most cases, parents of children with and without disabilities are not fully satisfied with the system of integrated education. Therefore, we should draw conclusions, improve, develop the school system and integrated classes on the basis of feedback from the stakeholders involved in this education. There are probably many other defects that were not listed by the current parents, but the faults identified should provide hints for the improvement of the process of education, care, therapy and, above all, to adapt the course of the teaching program for students with and without disabilities.

Students with physical disabilities (limb amputees, amblyopia, hearing loss) do not differ in intellectual level from non-disabled students. Limitations they have to face and cannot cope with are partly associated with the school's architecture and participation in physical classes such as physical education. Typical limitations involve a situation when a student moves in a wheelchair, or relies on external help, i.e. assistance needed to help him or her change to a sports outfit for a PE lesson.

Difficulties in integration occur in children with mental disorders such as autism, autistic symptoms, and schizophrenia. The students with the Asperger syndrome demonstrate considerable social limitations, but in terms of intellectual abilities sometimes they are ahead of other students.

Advantages of the integrated setting in education forms an extensive topic. The cooperation of two teachers and a small number of students offers individual work, constant adaptation of the program to their abilities, the graduation in terms of difficulty of tasks, and the application of interesting methods aimed at student activation. Individualization of the trajectory in education also applies to exceptionally able students for whom additional tasks are developed. During the lesson, students have an opportunity to

Speak more often and discuss their opinions. The cooperation between well-functioning, average, talented and ambitious students is known to assist, help and guide but most often motivate students with special educational needs to work.

Conclusions

1. The majority of the surveyed parents are satisfied with the performance of integrated classes. This system meets the expectations of parents of children with disabilities. Schools with integrated classes support the development of children both with and without disabilities. Children acquire *social and emotional skills most effectively when they attend such classes.*
2. A small proportion of parents, especially those with non-disabled children are convinced that students receive a lower level of teaching in the integrated class and that teachers do not have time during lessons for the more gifted and talented students (i.e. they do not receive enough attention). The reason for this conclusion is not fully clear, as many students in the investigated integrated classes are models in terms of learning achievements and receive a promotion to the next level with a certificate with a red stripe indicating high academic achievement.
3. Success in the adequate functioning of the class largely depends on the selection of students in a class, the type of disability, as well as communication and cooperation between teachers and parents.
4. Amongst the parents interviewed are those who observe that the work of the school comprises the running of integrated classes. These parents compare, research, and realize that the conditions provided by the education system – i.e. by the school – offer attractive learning conditions for their children. An important issue considered in selecting an integrated school is associated with safety, the atmosphere in the classroom and at school, easy access, trained teaching staff and the availability of specialist teams. Some parents experience anxiety and fear with regard to the

possibility of their children being mocked or harmed.

The growing problem is associated with the reluctance of parents of children without

disabilities to enroll their sons and daughters in integrated classes.

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Received: February 2018

Accepted: June 2018

Published: September 2018

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