

Good and Bad Sides of Social Integration of Disabled People

Abstract

In this presentation I try to explain the process of social integration of disabled people. I present the issues of the social and legal situation of the disabled, myths and stereotypes created by society and integration education (the presence of disabled children in normal schools).

I prepared it using the available professional literature and generally accepted educational programmes in Polish schools. Moreover, I analysed legislative acts concerning the disabled. I also used information from web sites, which are created by various organisations of the disabled.

The analysis shows that the number of disabled people depends on the health condition, and living conditions of society and also the efficient work of the health service. Moreover, we must remember that the phenomenon of disability becomes more intensive with aging, as the consequence of the population growing older.

Perceiving the status of a disabled person depends on such factors as: value systems in a given society, cultural influences and socioeconomic status of a country. If the marginalisation of certain social groups lasted for a long time, a completely natural reaction in such a situation would be a tendency to strengthen and consolidate one's identity, and also cultural and social distinction. The prejudices and stereotypes, concerning the disabled functioning in society, account for the main difficulties in their full revalidation and rehabilitation. The idea of integration, which means their full inclusion in social life, requires a change in the attitudes from negative to positive: tolerance, acceptance and cooperation.

Key words: *disabled people, social integration, social life, attitudes.*

Preface

What has recently become visible is the significant growth of interest in the problems connected with social integration of disabled people, both at the theoretical, as well as empirical level of different scientific branches. There are several sources of inspiration to perceive this problem. One of them is the universally acknowledged in present world fashion for tolerance and equalling the chances of different minority groups. The next is the presence of disabled people in society, which becomes more and more emphasized by them. That is why we can assume that this situation becomes shaped like social dialogue, which is an indispensable element of social changes at the time of constitutional transformation in Poland. This dialogue is also a natural consequence of the civilization progress.

According to the research conducted by The Principal Statistical Office (GUS), connected with the health condition of the Polish population, it is estimated that in 2004 about 6 million disabled people lived in our country, which is almost 19% of the total population (the women percentage was 19.7 % and for men it was 17.9 %). While nearly 78% of the disabled population have the legal opinion about their disability, the remaining 22% have not got it, but they are not able to function on their own. (GUS – The Health condition of the Polish population in 2004 r., p. 50–51)

The impairments that occur most often in adult disabled people (aged 15 and more) are: the dysfunction of blood circulation (49%) as well as the movement disability (46%). Next are: visual (nearly 30%) and hearing impairments (14%), neurological dysfunctions (29%) and mental disability (10%). (GUS – The Health condition of the Polish population in 2004 r., p. 51).

The research results point to the number of disabled children, which in 2004 was about 209 thousand altogether. Most of them live in cities - almost 63%. The rest come from villages (every third child aged 0-14) and so they have not got good access to medical treatment, rehabilitation and also education. 58% of the whole group have serious health problems. In this group almost every fourth child has problems with sight and speaking. Over 20% have difficulties with moving. (GUS – The Health condition of the Polish population in 2004 r., p. 52–54).

The majority of disabled people – 84% – live from social services: pensions and allowances. Only 8% of the population work. The rest of the group is dependent on other people (GUS - General National Census 2002 r.)

The above analysis shows that the number of disabled people depends on the health condition of society, living conditions and also the efficient work of health service. Moreover, we must remember that the phenomenon of disability becomes more intensive with aging, as the consequence of the population growing older.

Disabled person – terminological chaos

When we want to talk about the problems of disability, it is necessary to explain the term precisely. The term “disability” can be understood and defined in different ways. Consequently, the people who belong to such a special groups of disabilities have varied dysfunctions and different levels of biopsychosocial function impairment. Therefore, we can select three types of generally acknowledged definitions:

- 1) general – for example the definition accepted by the European Disability Forum – a disabled person is an individual with full rights, being in a discriminating situation as a result of environmental, economic and social barriers, which cannot be overcome because of possessed impairments. Such barriers are too often enlarged by depreciating attitudes of society. (Galkowski, 2003, Internet);
- 2) written for definite aims – for example for professional rehabilitation and employment. According to this definition a disabled person is somebody whose physical, psychical or intellectual state makes it (permanently or temporarily) difficult or impossible to fulfill social roles and especially limits the ability to work. (Dz. U. 1997 r. Nr 123 poz. 776 z zm.);
- 3) detailed – connected with different types of impairment, for example:
 - sensory impairments, such as visual or hearing impairments;
 - physical impairment affecting movement, such as post-polio syndrome, spinal cord injury or cerebral palsy;
 - cognitive impairments, such as Autism, Down Syndrome or Hyperactivity;
 - psychiatric conditions, such as Phobia, Depression, Schizophrenia or Neurosis;
 - combined impairment – more than one disability.

Process of the social integration of disabled people

The social, legal and economic transformations initiated in Poland after 1989 put disabled people in a special situation. Taking into account the fact that disability itself can affect the deterioration of the living conditions and intensification of the process of social exclusion, it must be noticed that the year of constitutional transformations in our country created the threat of considerable marginalisation for this social group. In the 1990s the first system and individual mechanisms appeared, connected with the idea of normalization of the disabled living standards, which created for them the realistic possibilities of stepping out of the margin.

The first legal acts, creating the basis of the new social policy for the disabled, started appearing in 1991. Moreover, different organizations established by the disabled came into being, trying to create ginger groups, protecting their interests in the newly shaped social order. The effects of this work, however, were not visible at once. The research carried out in 1993 by The Institute of Public Affairs, concerning the life situation of the disabled, showed a number of problems with satisfying the needs of this group and the existence of the social, material and institutional barriers, preventing the integration of the disabled within society. (Ostrowska et al., 2001, p. 9)

Visible changes did not appear until the second half of the 1990s, when a new social policy for the disabled was formulated. New laws regulating different aspects of the disabled were introduced in this period. Different institutions and programmes were originated. All of those aimed at securing the basic needs of the people struggling with different dysfunctions and developmental deficiency. What became the priority was the social integration and freeing of the rank-and-file activity.

Presently we can observe the growth of social awareness concerning the disabled and also the exposure of the problems connected with the quality of life of such people in the media. So far attention has been focused on the difficult material situation and the lack of jobs for the disabled – and such an attitude made other problems (connected with the quality of life) remain unnoticed by Polish society, as well as politicians. The research carried out in the 1990s showed that what dominates in the public opinion is the simplified image of life problems of the disabled – concerning problems with moving (architectural barriers) and low pensions. The difficulties connected with daily activities, social isolation, depending on others, the unfulfilled need for self-realisation or low chances of taking part in social life were rarely noticed. Also, the main acts of law from the previous years – concerning directly the disabled – regulated, above all, the problems with their work and employment (Ostrowska et al., 2001, p. 19).

The disabled still belong to the most wronged groups in our society. Although the present social and law tendencies, connected with the standardisation of life of the disabled, are constantly changing, they still face serious barriers, which prevent them from the unlimited activity in all spheres of social life. Hence, the actions aiming at improving the status and integration of the disabled in their work place and society constitute an essential element in effective social policy.

People with disabilities desire integration and approval of society. Hence what becomes important is the issue to undertake actions to prevent the phenomenon of social marginalisation. People with dysfunctions and developmental deficits are part of the working and social world, so they should be able to find their place in it.

Currently the discussion on the social integration aims at direct forms. Integration in education, at work and at home is seen not only as a goal, but also as a way leading to it. The indirect forms become criticised as being an attempt at “including through excluding”. The question concerning the social possibilities to include the disabled exists in many countries as a controversial issue. On the one hand, what becomes visible is the trend having the character of proclamation, being a serious attempt to directly realise the solidary community of all society members. On the other hand, we can not prevent ourselves from noticing the distancing present in society (Speck, 2005, p. 385).

The integration of the disabled within society and community requires fulfilling many conditions. The disabled must not only desire to be included in society, but also be properly prepared for it. It is connected, above all, with the possibility to perform different social roles and functioning in many social structures. Such an issue also applies to society, which must learn to treat its disabled members on equal terms – at many different levels of life. Thus, integration becomes a process of mutual learning and adopting the standards, and not a one-time act of good will. All the discussions on social integration of the disabled must therefore consider this phenomenon dynamically and take into account both partners of this interaction (Ostrowska et al., 2001, pp. 180-181).

Including Education (Education of Inclusion) – theory and practice

One of the most important tasks set before the Polish educational system is to help physically and intellectually impaired students. In recent years the idea of integrative schools has become very popular. In such schools the process of assimilation of healthy students and disabled ones works naturally. The transformations occurring in the special educational system should therefore be based on a change in approaching students’ disability, noticing their individual, yet changed by the dysfunction, needs and taking up the tasks aiming at creating the best conditions to normally function in society. The experience of many countries shows that integrative schools serve best the integration of children and the youth with special educational needs.

Children and the youth with special educational needs are students who have a physical and sensory dysfunction, as well as serious learning and emotional problems, but not only that. The notion “a pupil with special educational needs” is broader and includes physically, mentally, intellectually and socially disabled pupils, as well as prominent students. Paying attention to the subjectivity of the disabled is the result of the profound changes which occurred in the consciousness of our

society. It is connected with the change in the hierarchy of values and methods of acting in many spheres of life, eliminating prejudices and seeing a partner in every human being. Reforming actions, undertaken by different bodies and aiming at guaranteeing every child access to education, brings Poland closer to the standards valid in the European Union countries (Przybysz, 2005, p. 19–20).

The conviction that all children should, within the bounds of possibility, study together, regardless of the difficulties or differences experienced by them, is the fundamental principle of the functioning of integrative schools. There is a more and more universal agreement concerning the fact that children and the youth with special educational needs should be taken into account when preparing educational plans for the majority of children. The challenge, which the integrative school faces, concerns the development of teaching that concentrates on the child and is able to effectively educate all children, including those who are in a very unfavourable position or suffer from disability.

From the research concerning so understood integrative school system, there appears a need to make a step forward – as an idea of the education of inclusion. It appears that the idea of spatial and programme integration at schools is not sufficient. Children in the so-called integrative institutions often lack the feeling of belonging to the school community. Thus, it is not enough to just fulfill the special educational needs. Taking care of individual and social needs of disabled pupils becomes necessary. The idea of educational inclusion requires reconstruction of the educational system in such a way that it becomes possible to create the feeling of belonging to the community for every student, regardless of the kind or degree of their disability.

Including schools are particularly effective in building solidarity among children with special needs and their peers. This solidarity creates a situation in which there is only one community of pupils and not two – those who are healthy, and those impaired. Thus, the notion of “inclusion” enters a broader perspective of human rights, where all forms of segregation are morally wrong (UNESCO, 1994).

In different regions of the world the vision of including education is carried out to a different degree. However, it is a process, from which there is not, and should not be a way back. The examples from Italy, Canada, the USA, Great Britain and Scandinavia show that even in the cases of deeper or varied disability integration is possible and is desirably effective, concerning the disabled themselves, as well as their peers and teachers. The process of initiation of the inclusive education idea should be carried out by providing the suitable legislation and preparing competent, supportive people (most often assistants individually helping the disabled child) (Firkowska-Mankiewicz, 2001, Internet).

Analysing the process of passing from segregational education, through differ-

ent forms of integration, to including education, Poland is definitely nearer the end of segregation. The profitable changes for the education of the disabled are reflected at the legislative level. According to the law concerning the system of education from 7th September 1991, disabled children and youth are guaranteed the possibility to study in all types of schools, "according to the individual developmental and educational predispositions" (Dz. U. 1991 Nr 67, poz. 329). This law proclaims also that the content, methods and organisation of education must correspond to the psychophysical abilities of pupils, and that they are granted psychological care, as well as special forms of didactic work. Moreover, the amendment to the law concerning the system of education, being in force from 1st January 1996, relates to the fact that severely disabled children are obliged to learn, thus regarding their participation in rehabilitational – educational classes as fulfilling their educational obligations (Dz. U. 1996 Nr 101, poz.504). Hence, the children, omitted so far, have been included in the obligatory educational system.

Those records, however, still remain inconsistent with the everyday educational practice, especially when we take into account severely disabled children and the youth, particularly those living in villages. In the school year 1996/1997 different methods of integrating teaching included only 2% of about 0.5 million pupils with special educational needs, among whom intellectually impaired children constituted about 80% (Bogucka, 2000, p.117). While it is true that the number of integrating institutions and children supervised by them is dynamically growing, yet the needs concerning the matter still remain unsatisfied.

Summing up, I have to point to the number of profitable changes, which may be triggered. At the individual level, the changes include the disabled, as well as their healthy peers. At the intentional level they concern, above all, organisation and functioning of individual schools, as well as the whole educational systems. The social-wide dimension of inclusive education concerns undertaking actions aiming at the re-shaping of the awareness and social attitudes towards disabled people.

Among the advantages connected with such an education one may mention the possibility of fuller intellectual, personal, and especially social development of disabled children, thanks to the fact that such development occurs in a natural environment, without separating the child from the family and neighbouring friend circles. Common education of all the children from a given area is beneficial also for the fully-able peers, making them accustomed to the dissimilarity, teaching them acceptance, tolerance and solidarity (Firkowska-Mankiewicz, 2001, Internet).

Education of inclusion also poses many challenges before the educational system and the functioning of individual schools. It mobilizes them to improve educational programmes and teaching methods, as well as it makes them flexible by stimulat-

ing the development of teachers' competences and popularising "such a cultural climate that will answer more flexibly the needs of all the children of a given community. Such a climate would encourage the teachers to perceive the students with learning difficulties not as a problem, but as a trigger, thanks to which they can improve and develop individual teaching methods" (Ainscow, 2000, p. 181–207).

Myths and stereotypes about disabled people

The cognitive structures that man possesses contain, among others, the scheme of a human body structure, appearance and the way of functioning. This picture is mainly constituted by individual experience, as well as patterns and cultural standards, passed on by educational institutions or the media. Direct contact with people, whose characteristics distinctly diverge from this picture, causes an unpleasant tension and the feeling of psychic discomfort, which is typical of the cognitive discord phenomenon. The image of an abnormal individual, created in the mind of a perceiving person, repeatedly diverges from reality. The person ignores less expressive individual characteristics or those inconsistent with the created scheme. The person who is being perceived undergoes the processes of depersonalisation and categorisation. In this way the mind representations of "disabled" or "handicapped" people are created, and they are accompanied by the images of a typical representative model. The prototypes we are talking about are called the stereotypes of the above-mentioned categories. The stereotypes can be recognised as incomplete and simplified images, which function as facilitation or impediment of the cognitive and orientation processes. The stereotype functioning in society is a culturally determined phenomenon. We can talk about a general stereotype of a "disabled" or "handicapped" person, as well as separate stereotypes of people with definite kinds of dysfunctions and illnesses. (e.g. "suffering from AIDS", "suffering from cancer", "deaf" etc.) (Encyklopedia Pedagogiki XXI w., 2004, p. 651).

The research conducted in recent years in Poland points to the considerable diversity of social attitudes towards the disabled. About 15% of the questioned people show a definitely negative, isolating attitude. The questioned people possess a minimum knowledge of the disabled. In their opinion such a person has numerous physical and intellectual limitations, lacks self-reliance, is unproductive and is also a burden to others. People with negative attitudes avoid contact with the disabled and their families. They are very often afraid that they cannot behave properly when contacting with a disabled person, and also that they can encounter a painful experience. Such people forbid their own children to play with a disabled

child. They express their opinion that such a child is a burden to his or her parents, has no opportunities to develop, and that they should be put into a special institution. It happens that these people demonstrate their mercy and compassion.

Contradictory to the above-mentioned opinion is tolerance – an attitude presented by 25% of Polish society. People from this group perceive disability as a certain social fact. In their opinion, a disabled person can be, as far as possible, useful for their family and environment, and have an opportunity to arrange their personal and professional life happily. Such an image of the disabled is connected with the attitude of integration, manifesting itself in allowing one's children to remain in contact with disabled children. Moreover, people presenting such an attitude towards the disabled are not prejudiced against them, but they stay in contact with them and offer their help (Krasiejko, 2000, p.41).

Summing up, what must be noticed is that prejudices and stereotypes functioning in society, concerning the disabled, account for the main difficulties in their full revalidation and rehabilitation. The idea of integration, which means their full inclusion in social life, requires a change in the attitudes from negative to positive: tolerance, acceptance and cooperation. The European Year of People with Disabilities, proclaimed in 2003 by the Council of the European Union, created opportunities to take actions in this direction (Wyczesany, Gajdzica, 2005, p.16). At that time different initiatives were put into practise. They aimed at:

- arousing the awareness concerning the right of the disabled to be protected against discrimination, and to exercise their rights completely and equally;
- establishing cooperation among all the interested parties, namely the government, social partners, private sector, voluntary groups, the disabled and their parents;
- improving communication concerning disability and promoting a positive image of people with disabilities;
- arousing the awareness of the differences present among the disabled and different forms of discrimination;
- promoting the exchange of experience concerning good practise and effective strategies implemented at the local, national and European level.

Many organisations participated in celebrating the European Year of People with Disabilities in Poland. The best-known issue concerning the matter was a campaign initiated by the Friends of Integration Society under the banner of “Are we really different?”. It was made of several parts realised with the help of the media. Spots about people with disabilities were shown on TVP1, TVP2 and regional TVP3 channels (e.g. a blind father reading a Braille bed-time story to his child). Such an enterprise aimed at overcoming the barriers, mostly mental, in the contact with the disabled.

Conclusion

In the whole world the dynamics of disability is alarming, and each year growth in the number of the disabled can be observed. The statistics of the National Health Organisation show that there are about 500 million people with different degrees of disability in the world. In Poland the number of these people is estimated at 19% of the whole population. It means that almost 6 million people in our country require, periodically or permanently, very different forms and methods of rehabilitation. It becomes problematic not only for the disabled and their families, but, above all, for the local communities, in which the disabled live, and for social organisations, government and educational authorities.

It is an obvious matter that perceiving the status of a disabled person depends on such factors as: value systems in a given society, cultural influences and the socioeconomic status of the country. If the marginalisation of certain social groups lasted for a long time, a completely natural reaction in such a situation would be a tendency to strengthen and consolidate one's identity, and also cultural and social distinction. A separate issue, widely discussed in many publications, is the so-called duet of dependence between the donor and the recipient, which can refer to the relationship between the disabled and their environment. In the societies where the level of requirements that an average person encounters increases, owing to the civilisation changes or constitutional transformations, the situation of the people belonging to the dependent groups is particularly difficult (Gałkowski, 2003, Internet).

Minority groups, present in society and singled out for their specific characteristics, cause the attitudes of reluctance, and even rejection, demonstrating stereotyped prejudices and creating the division between "our people" and "the others". People with disabilities belong to such a group. Social discrimination can be worsened and sustained by an inappropriate educational policy, in which the lack of interest from mass schools in the problem of educating disabled children becomes accepted (Błęzyńska, 1996, pp. 9-17).

A contemporary mass school creates conditions for disabled children to study together with their healthy peers. At the school age, one of the most essential needs of children is the desire to be in a peer group – the feeling that results from the need for social contact and gaining approval. The situation of a disabled child is not always promising, both in relation to the didactic, as well as educational manner. The long-lasting observations of disabled children proved that they avoid a greater number of friends, limit their interpersonal contacts to a few people, aim at interaction with adults, and show a high degree of depending on the environment, and a low degree of self-activity. They do not participate actively in social

life, they withdraw from it. A child with impairments requires help from the teacher in contact with their friends (Krasiejko, 2000, p. 42–43).

It should be remembered that social contact between disabled and healthy people can take different forms which are defined as “the visibility of the disabled in society”. In this sense, the process of integration has the qualities of both a social and psychological phenomenon, which makes psychic barriers the most difficult to overcome for both sides. Therefore, the following questions may appear: how to educate to integration, how to prepare for the contact with disabled people in order not to fear the contact with them, get to know their needs and reach out to the person? On the other hand, how to shape prosocial behaviour towards disabled people, how to develop empathy, sympathy? Rising to those challenges constitutes one of the pulsating categories of the present days.

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