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Special Education in the Context of Educational Shifts towards Inclusion

ABSTRACT

The paper analyzes a confusion in the special education field caused by paradigm shifts towards social model of disability and inclusive model of education of children with special needs. Theoretical considerations concern the changes in the subject of the special education field's interests, terminology, teaching methods and methodology employed by a special education discipline. In the paper special education's and inclusive education's assumptions were confronted. As it turned out, in many points they are contradictory. Especially, the notion and practice of categorization rooted in traditional special education and demonstrable in special needs definition, teachers' training or teaching methods seem to be very difficult challenges for implementation of inclusive education.

Keywords
special education, inclusive education, special educational needs, disability

INTRODUCTION

The problem of paradigm shifts in special education is being raised more and more often in recent years. Scholars in the field stress an evolving approach to defining disability: from the view of impairment as an individual deficit towards a social theory of disability seen as the experience of social oppression (Oliver, 2004; Reindal, 2008; Krause, 2011; Barnes, 2012; Chrzanowska, 2015). Even though the social model of disability is not a new concept (UPIAS, 1976), implementing it in practice nevertheless became a great challenge in special rehabilitation as well as

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education. The main reason is that it undermines origins, well-known practices, perpetuated mental states, and stabilized policies in disability studies and services. Ever since the medical model of disability was criticised, the special education field as a science lost the firm ground of its rudimentary assumptions. Skrtic (1991, 1995) explains that the orthodoxy of special needs education is identified within a positivistic and functional paradigmatic frame, and the medical model of disability is the platform for classification systems used in special education. More and more confusion in the special education field is caused by a relatively new, but still revolutionary solution in teaching children with SEN (special educational needs): inclusive education. What is the relationship between special education in its current theoretical orientation and inclusive education as a phenomenon from the borderland of special and general education? How does the inclusive education concept fit within the basic and fixed systematization of special pedagogical knowledge? These two questions will be explained in the present paper.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

The term "special education," used interchangeably with "special pedagogy", was first employed in 1912 in Maria Montessori's description of pedagogical treatment for the various forms of disabilities (Cameron, Tveit, 2015, p. 78). The origins of special education were tightly bound with the positivist philosophy of science, objective observation and rationality. The historical path indicates the field's connections to the natural sciences, psychology and medicine (Cameron, 2012). As Cameron and Tveit (2015, p. 79) suggest, special methods applied in special schools were necessary to reduce the potential hardships that the presence of alternative approaches and struggling learners might have on other children in regular schools. Therefore special education came into existence as a response to the failure of general schools to teach children with learning difficulties or disabilities. Since some students were found unable to cope with school (or *vice versa*), segregated special schools were established (Ashman, Elkins, 2005).

In its beginnings, special education focused on the individual child. The presence of disability or learning difficulty was a prerequisite and it referred to specifically designed instruction that was inherently different from the education offered to other children (Cameron, Tveit, 2015, p. 79). The dichotomy between instruction provided in special schools and regular schools was distinctly marked. With the passage of time, especially with the Warnock Report's (1978) findings that 'one in five' pupils would experience learning difficulties at some point during

their time at school, challenged earlier assumptions. Yet the World Conference on Special Needs Education, organized by UNESCO and held in Salamanca in 1994, recommended that inclusive education should be the norm.

Many changes in special education over the last century led to some theoretical turnarounds: from a categorical to a relational perspective, from a medical to a social model of disability, and from segregative to inclusive approaches in education. These paradigmatic shifts directly influenced the main points of interest of special education.

First of all, the subject of the special education field's interests has changed. For a long time, "education" concerned people of school age, and "special" suggested extraordinary needs resulting from the disability. Nowadays we can observe change in the focus of special education at least in four respects:

a) Horizontally (a wider range of recognized special needs). Special education does not simply mean support for children with disabilities such as learning or behavioural difficulties; it also covers children with outstanding talents, health problems or multiple disabilities (OECD, 2012);

b) Vertically (wider age range). Special education initially dealt with school-age children's special needs, but today it looks at the whole of a person's life including adulthood and old age, e.g. special andragogy (Chrzanowska, 2015);

c) Qualitatively (special needs population). An increasing number of children with special needs showed the necessity of special knowledge about different forms of learning difficulties (GSI, 2014; GUS, 2016; Samuels, 2016; UK Department of Education, 2017);

d) Quantitatively (change in prevalence of different types of SEN). It has been shown that certain kinds of learning difficulties and disabilities recently observed in schools have become rarer, while others are becoming more and more common. Some authors call this phenomenon "categorical drift": proportional shifts in the prevalence of different categories of disability, while the total percentage of children identified within the population remains stable (Ysseldyke et al., 2000, s. 110). An increase in autism rates is described in multinational reports (Kim et al., 2011), alongside an anticipated decrease in Down Syndrome population prevalence (de Graaf et al., 2009).

Secondly, the transition also concerns the terminology used in the scientific field of special education. The first manual classification of intellectual disability degrees from 1919 used terms such as "moron", "idiot", and "imbecile" (Goddard's system), which have been forbidden in descriptions of people with intellectual disability in formal documents since 1968, but which are unfortunately still

present in colloquial language (Dykcik, 2001). Changing the official terms was not sufficient to influence the way people think about intellectual disability, so there was a need to change the definition in its essence. It happened in revised version of the classification manual published in 1992 (Luckasson et al., 1992), which de-emphasized the importance of IQ and stressed the adaptation to individual's life circumstances (Detterman, 2010, p. 540). Referring to other disabilities, it found an obligation to use "person first language" in all written and verbal communication, which suggests acknowledgement of the person beyond their disability (Cameron, 2012, p. 84). All these changes are supposed to avoid limiting the person to a "handicapped role," and to dispense with the image of them as a recipient of medical treatment (Dajani, 2001).

When it comes to another important scientific feature of special education, teaching methods, all the methods and strategies rooted in special education were aimed at repairing the person with special needs. In the beginning, there was an important concept developed in the Netherlands in 1961 (Nel, 1971): orthopedagogics, or orthodidactics. The term refers to the science as well as the practice of education which, for one or another reason has gone wrong and has to be repaired or corrected (Kotze, 1971). This approach nowadays has to endure criticism because of the "didactic instrumentalism" which reduces the person to a set of deficits, impairments and disorders (Krause, 2011, p. 78).

The methodology employed by a special education discipline lately saw many changes as well. A social model of disability as tied with "social constructionist" perspectives has an impact on scientific methods used to explore educational reality. Moving away from positivist traditions based on qualitative studies, this alternative approach builds on a very different understanding of scientific knowledge and interpretation of the world (Cameron, 2012, p. 83). According to Krause (2011, p. 182), the research on social functioning of people with disability from a hermeneutic perspective liberated the person from statistical and normative chains. Moreover, qualitative designs have not had a significant effect on special education research thus far (McWilliam, 1991). This is why special education is more and more interested with phenomenological approaches focusing on "lived experience" (Carrington, Papinczak, Templeton, 2003). People with disabilities are now considered fully competent to express their opinions, describe their experiences and communicate a subjective understanding of their perspective (Farrell, 2012, p. 58).

All the described changes in special education as a discipline must be seen in the light of transitions within educational sciences as a whole. Moving away from the positivist paradigm, which is rooted in a medical model of disability, towards

a humanistic paradigm and social conceptualization of disability, is the main trend of recent changes (Krause, 2011; Chrzanowska, 2015; Cameron, Thygesen, 2015). On the one hand, following new trends in social sciences may help to refresh special education as a discipline and keep it young as it reacts to new challenges and problems (Śliwerski, 2009). On the other hand, not keeping up with actual interpretations of social reality, and mixing old and new theoretical approaches, may undermine its scientific identity. Indeed, many have suggested that special education has been in crisis ever since researches launched the social model (Oliver, 1996). This crisis is especially demonstrable in the field of special education in mainstream schools as a part of the concept of inclusive education–going much further the physical placement of students with SEN in regular classes. While some researchers argue for positive interpretations of its ability to help in achieving effective inclusive education, others suggest that special education itself poses the greatest barrier to inclusive education (Richardson, Powell, 2011, p. 200).

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION VERSUS SPECIAL EDUCATION: THE OBJECT OF INTERESTS

Humanistic interpretations of disability influenced the tradition of education and brought about the reorganization of schooling. Instead of segregated classrooms specifically designed to cater to the students' particular incapacities, there are now mainstream schools ready to accommodate every student equally, regardless of their disabilities (Wang, 2009, p. 154). This transfer of special educational practice from the isolated special school to the general mainstream setting can be misleading when it comes to the object of this discipline. The focus of special educator used to be the person with disability, or the individual whose development is impaired. In practice, proceedings conducted by special teachers concerning particular groups of children revolved around one of many types of disability, e.g. visual, aural or intellectual, and took place in specific special schools.

According to Skrtic (1991), equal education of all children regardless of the types of difficulties they face changes the range of the population subjected to special education. All the medical parameters qualifying the child to particular kind of SEN category are now useless when the group of students is multidimensionally differentiated and every child has his own "special" needs.

Nevertheless, it can be said that transformation from special schools to mainstream ones did not change the object of interest of special education. It is still concerned with the same group of children deviated from developmental norms,

just placed in different educational settings. Unfortunately such explanations are contrary to the essence of inclusive education, which allows for a diversity of learning abilities among students. This is why inclusive school requires one instructional process that suits the needs of all, instead of two or more different but parallel teaching methods (Szumski, 2010, p. 42). Moreover, when we use a humanistic paradigm that emphasizes the social background of disability, we became unable to unequivocally describe special needs since they are constructed by social interpretations.

> While special education was previously defined as a rational response to students' objective need for special education, now, if the need for special education is defined from a social perspective, special education itself is seen as part of the same definition process (Kivirauma, 2004, p. 127).

Even though the focus is switched from impairment as an individual problem to social barriers as partly creating disability, there is always an interaction between impairment and disability as such (Reindal, 2008). The subject of special education seems to be a child who needs special organization in education, and who in this way deviates from developmental norms. These norms are less objectively appraised in an inclusive educational context (arising not only from a medical diagnosis of reduced function, but also from a socially constructed exclusion experience). In this sense, the subject of inclusive education does include the subject of special education – but they cannot be equated. While inclusive concepts deny difficulty rather that embrace it (Rogers, 2007, p. 56), special education identifies it in order to design specific adjustments. In inclusive education, the norm is blurred while special education still treats it as a starting point for assessing the social, intellectual or physical situation of a person, which, undeniably, can be very beneficial when its labelling consequences are minimized (Krause, 2011, p. 191).

SPECIAL STATUS OF STUDENTS' EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

When are students' needs special? This seemingly trivial question became a serious problem when special education was transferred to mainstream schools, rejecting a categorization of impairments through classification systems grounded in a psycho-medical understanding of disability (Warnock, 1978). Popularly, students who are different from their peers in educational, behavioural or developmental respects, are often referred to as students with special needs (Ormrod, 2009).

As Mittler (2000, p. 9) argues, the fact that the educational needs of disabled people are special is not a result of their special nature, but rather an implication of insufficient accommodating of these needs by current pedagogy. In inclusive settings, there are many dimensions contributing to the individual and unique needs of all children: gender, cultural background, abilities, developmental functioning and so on (J. O'Brien, C. L. O'Brien, 1997; Kauffman, Landrum, 2009). Disability is not more distinctive than any other dimension. Bishop (2014) states that the term "special educational needs" was introduced in order to move away from deficit categories and increase the focus on what was required to provide learning opportunities and support learning. The consequence of distinguishing only one group of children's needs suggest the rejection of a categorization system grounded in special education. This is why "Inclusive education challenges the long-ago developed structures of educational systems, which sort and group students in different ways" (Richardson, Powell, 2011, p. 206).

While inclusive education understands the notion of difference at an individual level, the special education tradition is focused on grouping differences into categories. There were and still are many reasons for grouping children on the basis of their special needs:

> The classification system in special education has been a tool to organise information of pupils' needs and has served among other things: to understand the differences among pupils and to rationalise the distribution of resources (Florian et al., 2006, p. 37).

Therefore the special education field was divided into subcategories of many different independent teaching methodologies, designed for children with particular disabilities who could attend schools designed for the visually disabled, the intellectually disabled, the deaf, etc. Even though mainstream schools are open for children with disabilities, special classes are still being formed, e.g. ADHD special education classes in the Swedish school system (Malmqvist, Nilholm, 2016) or special classes for pupils with ASD in Ireland (McCoy et al., 2014).

OECD's (2012) overview of definitions of SEN (special educational needs) shows that in many countries, they are still organised into different categories on the basis of psychomedical diagnoses (e.g. in Belgium, Netherlands). Analyzing other definitions, they can be divided into two groups on the grounds of what caused the special need:

– Insufficient ability of the child: the SEN is caused by the child's inability to achieve the goals of the national curriculum without receiving special provision (e.g. in Austria, Czech Republic);

– Insufficient ability of the school system: the SEN is caused by an extraordinary way of fulfilling the demands of the curriculum, resulting in the necessity to make changes or adaptations in the content of studies, the study processes or the learning environment (e.g. in Estonia, Sweden).

Inclusive education as a "school for all" puts the focus on adjusted support for the student's needs. Moreover, this support is not provided absolutely and consistently when functional disability is identified, but rather when the school is unable to cope with the needs of the child. This process is based on subjectively constructed interpretations and judgements:

> Special educational needs" refer to "institutionalized cultural value judgments about behavior, intellectual functioning, and health that result in particular human differences being recognized as deserving of support or professional service (Powell, 2006, p. 579).

If special education broadens the definition of special needs as the rise of inclusive education implies, the special support must include also the needs that arise from ethnicity, social class, cultural context, and other things that have not been subjects of the field so far. The identity of special education seems to be undermined by this lack of consensus concerning what range of population is the subject of special educational theory and practice. Impairment and disability do not constitute "special" educational actions anymore. When school system is responsive to an untypical functioning on the part of the child, impairment stops being seen as a cause of special needs:

> Special needs are not needs arise in a child with disabilities with regard to a system that is fixed. Rather they are needs that arise between the child and the educational system as a whole when the system fails to adopt itself to the characteristics of the child (Terzi, 2005, p. 448).

Such perceptions of crucial notions from the special education field influences other areas, such as teachers' training, basic teaching methods and rules applied in mainstream schools.

TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE

The shift in governmental policies towards inclusive education does not compare to the real changes on the ground in educational practice. Teachers across Europe are finding it hard to follow the policy of inclusive education (De Boer et al., 2011;

Sobel et al., 2003). Nevertheless, they are regarded as key persons in the development and implementation of inclusive education (Hegarty, 1994). In the domain of teaching children with SEN in mainstream schools, there is another dichotomy between "classic" special education and inclusive education: the roles of special needs educators and regular schoolteachers.

The special education tradition requires the disability-specific training of special educators. The first courses for special teachers corresponded to each of the different types of schools and SEN categories (Cameron, 2012, p. 80). The traditional role of special educators was providing support when problems arise in a child's developmental progress. The special teacher was supposed to be equipped with the diagnostic tools necessary to identify specific deficits, and to recommend a program for treatment (Cameron, 2012, p. 74). In inclusive settings, these tasks belong to a regular teacher, whose training should include a preparation program for teaching children with different educational needs. Knowledge about one type of disability or learning difficulty is useful only to a minor extent when most classes are heterogeneous. The Salamanca Statement (1994) recommends in point 45 and 46:

> The training of special teachers needs to be reconsidered with a view to enabling them to work in different settings and to play a key role in special educational needs programmes. A non-categorical approach encompassing all types of disabilities should be developed as a common core, prior to further specialization in one or more disability-specific areas.

Persistent categorical models of training for future teachers contributes to difficulties in implementing appropriate inclusive education and providing the exact support needed by students with SEN in mainstream settings. As Cameron and Jortveit (2014) observed, the traditional view of the special educator as a teacher with specialized knowledge and skills continues to dominate. Next to the academic programmes for special education, notwithstanding teachers who offer cross-categorical degrees designed for the simultaneous support for students with different need levels, there are still disability-specific majors. Moreover, the focus on inclusion in initial teacher education is not sufficiently common among European universities (less than 50% of the 43 German universities, 31% of the Lithuanian schools and colleges) (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2011, p. 22). In Denmark, issues around diversity and inclusion are still most often discussed during special needs courses, rather than by all teacher educators in all general courses. Not only quantity, but also the quality of special knowledge introduced in teacher training programs has an important meaning:

> The teacher-training imperative revolves around the transmission of regulated chunks of traditional special educational knowledge so that the professions retain their authority and classroom teachers are not so spooked when different students enter the classroom (Slee, 2004, p. 80).

Paradigmatic shift from homogeneity to heterogeneity (Sliwka, 2010) is difficult to deal with in teaching practice. Difference is seen as a challenge, because it cannot be anticipated or addressed with well-known procedure. In this context, the impact of special education's tradition is so powerful that inclusive education will be waiting a long time for mental and political change influencing teachers' attitudes and knowledge. On the other hand, undermining the view that special education means special teaching weakens the position of special teachers as experts, because their knowledge ceases to be considered special as well (Peacey, 2005, p. 4). Professional identity seems to be jeopardized not only by a universal approach to teach heterogeneous sets of people, but also by the progressive extinction of disability culture (Hall, 2004). Cameron and Tveit (2015, p. 85) ask: "Where do special educators fit into the educational system when they no longer function as teachers for children with special needs in segregated setting?" The answer seems easy. Special educators should share their expertise in mainstream schools and support regular teachers. Thus, special education is losing its identity as a separate service and becomes a support service for all students (Marinosson, Bjaranson, 2014, p. 304). When we bring over special education as an emergency service for regular education's failures, it loses its independent status. One of the consequences of such a mechanism is perceiving special education as an "artefact of regular education" (Skrtic, 1991). Emanuelsson (1997, p. 492) also underlines the new ancillary role of special education towards a regular one:

> The fact that special education is also organized as a response to the needs in regular teaching settings of getting rid of disturbances in terms of deviant diagnosed students … has only recently been taken into full consideration […].

Nevertheless, all those changes probably cannot deny the necessity of the special educator's profession. Moreover, the special knowledge and expertise must be broadened to include the general teacher's training, and these both fields of study should not be treated separately. Inclusive education will contribute to the beginning of new quality of special teacher profession. As long as special needs stay "special" – as overstepping the support service available in regular schools—there will be a need for external specialist service.

INDIVIDUAL OR INDIVIDUALIZED INSTRUCTION FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITY?

The basic thesis of inclusive education, which claims that one instructional process can encompass all pupils' needs, meets with a few difficulties. The assumption from the origins of special education was that students with disabilities or learning difficulties need special instruction and the main reason to locate them in special schools and provide with special programs was inappropriate education in general schools. Inclusion theories assume, by contrast, that all students, regardless of ability, may be taught appropriately in the same venue (Kauffman, Badar, 2014). The continued existence of special schools as separate forms of education in many countries is one proof that equal education for all is not entirely possible. The main problem lies in common curricula, which seem not to cover all the various needs implicated by many types of learning difficulties. According to inclusive education's assumptions, this hurdle disappears when the sphere of commonality of needs of children with disabilities or those without any learning difficulties is found. One of the earliest theories against recognizing the specificity of needs and problems experienced by people with disabilities was developed by Hulek (1972). The mechanisms regulating the behaviour of disabled as well as non-disabled people are similar or the same. The deterministic view on traits of people with disabilities is wrong, because it leads to an excessive specialization in service provision (including in education). There are common traits and needs among the disabled and non-disabled people, and what is specific concerns only few areas of their life. Similar perspectives are presented in the article of Norwich and Lewis (2007) who distinguished three types of educational needs: needs common to all learners, needs specific or distinct to groups of learners (e.g. children with disability), and needs unique to individual learners. One characteristic of an inclusive approach is making the instructional decision on the basis of unique needs and differences, while common needs remain in the background. Treating the needs of students with disabilities or learning difficulties as general for this sub-group is favored by traditional special pedagogy based on categorisation. As authors say "[…] Conventional SEN groupings may be neither valid nor useful when planning teaching strategies." (Norwich, Lewis, 2007, p. 128).

This is why they advocate a position which assumes a continuation of common teaching strategies based on unique individual differences instead of splitting teaching into distinct types of methods tailored to the particular SEN category. The same conviction is found in the study of Broderick and cowriters:

> General-education teachers, who with appropriate supports learn to attend to every student's individual needs, can replace the specially designed, and often uninteresting one-to-one skills and drills, typically suggested for disabled students, with responsive class activities contingent on individual performance (2005, p. 194).

The trend away from SEN-specific teaching has been recently developed in the approach of differentiated instruction, which means the use of a variety of strategies to the content, processes, and products to anticipate and respond to differences in student readiness, interests and learning profiles (Tomlinson, 2000). This kind of modification of the content, pace or other aspects of the instructional process can be perceived as an unfair burden imposed on the classroom teacher (Broderick et al., 2005, p. 156). However, it occurs only when educators believe that special needs can be accommodated merely by special experts from the special education field. Special and general teaching processes are no longer dichotomized, but instead merged, along with a cooperation (or rather collaboration) between teachers and specialists. Classic orthodidactic methods in inclusive schools pose a barrier rather than a support, and for that reason they should be replaced by differentiated instructional strategies, such as:

– Adjustment of content. Rich and challenging content instead of impoverished curricula focused on rudimentary concepts;
– Adjustment of process. Collaborative discussion teams (Salend, 2004), class-wide peer tutoring (Fulk, King, 2001), book discussions (Berry, Englert, 1998; Martin, 1998) instead of individual learning under the teacher's control;
– Adjustment of product. Multiple modes of presentation, a range of options for demonstrating what they know and can do (Tomlinson, Eidson, 2003) instead of conventional tasks from books.

One may say that this approach, and a total retiring of special methods, will deprive children with SEN of appropriate and adjusted support, which is against the basic normalization rule. But on the other hand, specialized teaching hinders the inclusion of children with disabilities into their peer community. This strongly contradicts the *raison d'être* of special education (Szumski, 2006, p. 34). No one can deny that special support for children with extraordinary needs helps to obtain better functioning in society, but at the same time it stigmatizes them and reduces social acceptance. The conclusion is that special education must find a golden mean, and continue to support students with special needs, but with minimal usage of special methods.

CONCLUSION

Special education, at a time of rapidly growing inclusive education practices and theories, has lost its identity in many ways: in the object of its interests, teaching strategies, scientific methodology, and paradigmatic background. The question is whether special education can cope with these crises, and if so, how? Some authors believe that special schools should cease to exist (Whittaker, 2001), while others propose their evolution into new forms (Baker, 1989, p. 24).

Kauffman and Badar (2014) argue that special education's future in the United States is not predictable, and may proceed according to three scenarios. The first one puts special education as invisible service, subsumed completely under general education. This is the most likely outcome if it is assumed that all students should receive the same instruction regardless of their differences. In the second scenario, special education is offered to those with the most severe disabilities who comprise just a small percentage of school population. The third scenario concerns the situation which has become the status-quo nowadays: that special education stays intact. Special education needs to be maintained at its current level but improved.

What is certain is that special education is not supposed to build its identity around the institution of special schools, but to capitalize on its output as a valuable support for special difficulties in mainstream schools. This support will become an asset if special education as well as inclusive education cease to maintain their own status-quo: categorical perspective and functionalist models of schooling. In this situation, cooperation between special and general education will lead to only the appearance of inclusion or individualized support. In the worst scenario it looks as follows:

> Special education stumbles into the reductionist trap of promoting inclusive education according to the technical assimilationist imperative of making "defective" kids fit the school as it is (Slee, 2004, p. 77).

Thus, inclusion is not an issue with which traditional special education alone must cope, as it concerns all the students in the school and is therefore also the problem of general education. Mainstream schools should be open, flexible and eager to draw from the rich output of special education. Despite many inconsistencies about what is "special", and what domain should take care of it, the main priority is the interest of every child. We should not discredit the meaning of special education and treat it as a contrasting system to general education. Even if special education still stands for highly specialized teaching or revalidation

services, these actions should not be seen as instruments of oppression but rather as ways of helping, essential for as long as regular schools remain unready for true diversity.

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