

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AS A CHALLENGE FOR UNITING EUROPE – POLISH EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

This paper aims to point out the importance of inclusive education for building social cohesion in a united Europe. Inclusive education is understood here as a model, the full implementation of which requires continuous efforts to adapt the educational system to the special needs of all children, especially those at risk of marginalization and social exclusion, including children with disabilities. Inclusive education is discussed through the prism of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which became the basis for the analyses. In the example of Poland, the key tasks for implementing inclusive education are indicated, starting with training teaching staff and ending with structural changes. An important conclusion is to show the fields of cooperation common to all EU member states, which can be effectively implemented and can contribute to strengthening the principle of equality and non-discrimination, not only in an educational dimension.

Key words: social inclusion, inclusive education, human rights-based model, social cohesion

Education and its social significance

Education is a comprehensive and ambiguous concept that does not refer only to learning processes but is also a process deeply immersed in social life and culture. It can reinforce, reproduce and perpetuate existing social structures and dominant values, thus contributing to inequality and exclusion. However, it can also be a field for critical reflection on reality and a tool for triggering social change to level out negative phenomena and make the world a more welcoming and inclusive place for all¹. Equal access to education understood as a fundamental right of every human being, has its roots in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or the International Convention on the Rights of the Child. One of the important international documents indicating the importance of education for all is the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The Convention was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2006. It took the international community two years for the Convention to come

¹ Pawlik, S.; Rzeźnicka-Krupa, J.; Gierczyk, M.; Hornby, G. (2023), The Voices of Autistic Adolescents on Diversity, Education and School Learning in Poland, Educ. Sci. no. 13, 2023, p. 1. DOI: 10.3390/educsci13040368.

into force and the human rights-based model of disability to be adopted². Currently, there is a global consensus on the importance of the full realization of the rights of people with disabilities, as evidenced, among other things, by the number of ratifications of the document (the Convention is ratified by 186 parties³ out of 193 UN members). Notably, the European Union is also a party to the Convention. This document is significant for people with disabilities, who often remain socially, economically, and developmentally disadvantaged. Implementing the Convention's provisions at the national level can counteract social marginalization, discrimination against people with disabilities and enable them to fully influence the shaping of their own lives.

The right to education is probably the most effective means to achieve equal opportunities for groups at risk of social exclusion⁴. The right to quality education for all is a fundamental right, the actual realization of which gives an individual the knowledge, skills, and competencies to navigate the modern world. A person deprived of educational opportunities is in a situation that limits his actual realization of other human rights and freedoms⁵. It is realized through inclusive education, understood as a set of processes for the formulation of the totality of human abilities, taking place in non-segregative and non-separative conditions, i.e., in the circumstances devoid of categorization features, respecting and taking into account the diverse abilities and needs of the educated subjects. Its essence is to work in the mainstream of education, and an important task is to develop all students and increase their social participation, especially those of them who are developmentally or socially disadvantaged. Its leading element is to anticipate, identify and eliminate barriers (awareness, cultural, architectural) that impede the processes of constructing quality education for all students⁶. It is important to look at education as a system that supports the future functioning of a person. The perspective of the long-term consequences of the functioning of the nationally adopted educational system allows for a fuller understanding of the importance of this process. „Inclusive education is a model whose realization enables a good start to the full inclusion of people with disabilities already outside the educational system, in a heterogeneous society that accepts and affirms individual differences“⁷. A society that is open to diversity, in which everyone, regardless

² Degener, T. (2017), A human rights model of disability, in: P. Blanck, E. Flynn (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Disability Law and Human Rights*, Routledge, London, pp. 31-49.

³ Poland ratified the Convention in 2012, the same year Bulgaria also ratified the Convention.

⁴ de Beco, G. (2016), Transition to Inclusive Education Systems According to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, „*Nordic Journal of Human Rights*“ no. 1 (34), pp. 40-59. DOI: 10.1080/18918131.2016.1153183.

⁵ Widawska, E. (2014), Implementation of the right to education for persons with disabilities considering the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, in: E. Widawska, K. Skotnicki (eds.), *Social and legal aspects of the functioning of persons with disabilities*, AJD Publishing House, Częstochowa, pp. 11-25.

⁶ Gajdzica, Z.; Skotnicka, B.; Pawlik, S.; Belza-Gajdzica, M.; Trojanowska, M.; Prysak, D.; Mrózek, S. (2021), Analysis of school practice and characteristics of a school effectively implementing education inclusive education in practice - research report, MEIN, Warsaw, p. 7. <https://us.edu.pl/wydzial/wns/wp-content/uploads/sites/17/Nieprzypisane/analiza-praktyki-szkolnej-i-charakterystyka-szkoly-efektywnie-realizujacej-edukacje-wlaczajaca-w-praktyce.pdf>

⁷ Widawska, E. (2012), The principle of equal treatment for people with disabilities and inclusive education, in: J. Jaskiernia (eds.), *Effectiveness of the European system of human rights protection. Areas of analysis of the effectiveness of the European system of human rights protection*, Adam Marszałek Publishing House, Toruń, pp. 827-847.

of their level of ability, has the opportunity to exercise their rights and freedoms equally with others.

Thus, inclusive education is a process that requires continuous efforts to adapt the education system to the special needs of all children, especially those at risk of marginalization and social exclusion, including children with disabilities. According to the cited definition, inclusive education is not about „placing“ children with disabilities in mainstream schools but designing entire education systems to accommodate the diverse needs of children from the very beginning. Thus, a profound culture change is needed to make schools inclusive, resulting directly from a change in the public perception of education. Therefore, the goals of education and the entire way children are taught must be revised⁸. The right to inclusive education is enshrined, among other things, in Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It also stems from the European Pillar of Social Rights endorsed by the European Council, the European Parliament, and the European Commission⁹.

According to the first principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights: „Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successful transitions in the labor market“¹⁰.

The Polish experience

Realizing the right to inclusive education poses a particular challenge for the Polish educational system. From 1945 to 1989, the education of students with disabilities in Poland was implemented only within a separate, parallel system of special education (kindergartens, schools of various levels, and special education centres), adapted to the needs of students depending on the type of disability¹¹. Only the socio-political changes after 1989 gave rise to intensive changes in educational law, enabling the gradual development of inclusive education. It became possible to create inclusive institutions (branches) and integrate students with disabilities into the mainstream school system. Since then, the percentage of students with disabilities in non-segregated education (integrative and inclusive) has steadily increased¹². According to data from the 2022/2023 school year, the enrolment rate of students with official certification of special educational needs in mainstream and inclusive schools was about 65%¹³.

⁸ de Beco, G. (2016), Transition to Inclusive Education Systems According to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, „Nordic Journal of Human Rights“ no. 1 (34), p. 41. DOI: 10.1080/18918131.2016.1153183.

⁹ European Commission (2021), The European pillar of social rights action plan Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, https://commission.europa.eu/publications/european-pillar-social-rights-action-plan_en.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 44.

¹¹ Pawlik, S.; Rzeźnicka-Krupa, J.; Gierczyk, M.; Hornby, G. (2023), The Voices of Autistic Adolescents on Diversity, Education and School Learning in Poland, Educ. Sci. no. 13, 2023, p. 2. DOI: 10.3390/educsci13040368.

¹² Marcinkowska, B. (2015), Education of students with disabilities in Poland-past, present, future, „Psychologia wychowawcza“ no. 7, pp. 205-219, DOI: 10.5604/00332860.1161613.

¹³ Students with a statement on the need for special education by school type and province in the school year 2022/2023, <https://dane.gov.pl/pl/dataset/182,dane-statystyczne-uczniow-z-orzeczeniem-o-potrzebie-ksztacenia-specjalnego>.

Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004 and the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2012 became the milestones in implementing the idea of inclusive education. Since 2006, Poland has also been a member of the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education and regularly publishes detailed reports on the education of students with diverse needs at different stages of education.

One of the key conditions for implementing the idea of inclusive education is the adequate preparation of teaching staff for the new tasks and challenges arising from its implementation¹⁴. The 2011 World Report on Disability World Health Organization, referring to people with disabilities as a group particularly vulnerable to educational exclusion, points to the importance of proper training of teachers in mainstream schools to ensure that they feel competent and equipped with the skills necessary to teach groups of students with diverse needs. Beata Jachimczak, referring to the report, stresses the need for teacher education to focus not only on skills and knowledge but also on attitudes and values: „For as important as the formation of practical competencies of future personnel for education is the development of directional competencies related to attitudes of tolerance, understanding of the nature of social problems underlying all processes of marginalization and exclusion,“ notes Jachimczak¹⁵.

A similar position is presented in the document entitled „Teacher Education for Inclusion. Key Policy Messages,“ which presents conclusions and recommendations from the European Agency for the Development of Education of Pupils with Special Needs project on teacher preparation education for inclusive education (TE4I): „Most importantly, the TE4I project findings argue for the need to improve teacher competences and promote professional values and attitudes“¹⁶. The document defines four core values that underpin the competencies of teachers working in an inclusive model:

- Valuing pupil diversity;
- Supporting all learners;
- Working with others;
- Continuing personal professional development¹⁷.

According to Jachimczak¹⁸, the above principles are often overlooked in theory and school practice (including higher education). Preparation of teachers to work in inclusive classrooms should equip them with such knowledge, skills, and attitudes that they are ready to work with a diverse group of students¹⁹. To achieve this goal,

¹⁴ Jachimczak, B. (2019), Teacher in inclusive education, in: I. Chrzanowska, G. Szumski (eds.), Inclusive education in kindergarten and school, FRSE Publishing House, Warsaw.

¹⁵ Jachimczak, B. (2018), Teacher Education for Inclusive Education [Teachers Education for Inclusive Education], Educational Studies no. 48, p. 37. DOI: 10.14746/se.2018.48.3.

¹⁶ European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (2011), Teacher Education for Inclusion. Key Policy Messages, Odense. https://www.european-agency.org/sites/default/files/teacher-education-for-inclusion-key-policy-messages_te4i-policy-paper-EN.pdf

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ Jachimczak, B. (2019), Teacher in inclusive education, in: I. Chrzanowska, G. Szumski (eds.), Inclusive education in kindergarten and school, FRSE Publishing House, Warsaw.

¹⁹ Zamkowska, A. (2021), Preparation of future teachers for inclusive education-international guidelines and directions of change, „Rocznik Pedagogiczny“ no 3 (13), pp. 53-66. DOI: 10.18290/rped.21133.3.

content on the theoretical assumptions of inclusive education and methodology of working with diverse groups should be included in the curricula of studies preparing teachers for the profession.

Relating the above guidelines, derived from several international documents to the standards of education preparing for the profession of special education teacher issued by the Polish Ministry responsible for the implementation of state policies in the field of education and higher education, it can be noted that the issue of inclusive education has been taken into account in a wide range²⁰. Each future teacher, a graduate of the special education faculty²¹, will have qualifications and competencies in the field of inclusive education obtained during the study through the implementation of a compulsory educational module on inclusive education of no less than 510 hours. The content of the module, according to the standard, concerns: the theory and organization of inclusive education, diagnosis of special educational needs, planning, implementation, and monitoring of support activities, methodology of education in diverse groups, and educational programs in inclusive education²². However, before graduates of the reformed teacher education system find employment in educational institutions, solutions are being implemented to strengthen the knowledge, skills, and competencies in working with a group of students with diverse developmental and educational needs of teachers already working in schools. Selected universities in Poland provide free postgraduate training in this area. Its primary purpose is to improve skills in the adequate provision of psychological and pedagogical assistance, develop a teacher's workshop and enrich it with attractive ways of conducting classes in a group with diverse educational needs. Graduates of the improvement studies gain competence in, among other things:

- practical implementation of the model of inclusive education as quality education for all learners,
- practical application of educational legislation in the organization and implementation of inclusive education;
- working with a class with diverse educational needs and creating conditions for effective learning for all students using the principles of universal design;
- application of educational strategies for building a class team conducive to implementing inclusive education and integrating a group with diverse needs and abilities²³.

Implementing the Convention requires not only the preparation of teaching staff but also extremely important people, putting into practice the principles of quality

²⁰ Regulation of the Minister of Science and Higher Education of July 25, 2019, on the standard of education preparing for the teaching profession, Dz.U. 25.07.2019, item 1450. Currently, the government administration department - higher education and science is headed by the Minister of Education and Science.

²¹ The first graduates of the reformed programs will graduate in Poland in 2024.

²² Regulation of the Minister of Science and Higher Education of July 25, 2019, on the standard of education preparing for the teaching profession, Dz.U. 25.07.2019, item 1450.

²³ Improving Postgraduate Studies, University of Silesia, <https://www.studiapodyplomowe.us.edu.pl/doskonalace-studia-podyplomowe-dla-nauczycieli-szkol-podstawowych-i-ponadpodstawowych-prowadzacych-zajecia-z-uczniami-o-zroznicowanych-potrzebach-rozwojowych-i-edukacyjnych-edycja-2023/>.

education for all. Equally important is building a system where educators could effectively carry out their tasks. Because these people, deprived of structural support and a view of education from the point of view of law and humanity, cannot perform their tasks effectively²⁴. This applies both to activities undertaken at the national level and those undertaken at the local level.

The main challenges concerning implementing inclusive education in Poland include sectoralism and siloed implementation of needs at the local level. Separately, the education, social welfare, and health sectors are dealing with this issue. The lack of standards for cross-sectoral management of the inclusion process at the national level results in individual parts of the system with their tools and separate budgets implementing activities devoid of coordination. The fragmentation of support leads to less adequacy and efficiency in implementing inclusive solutions at the local level. An attempt to respond to the diagnosed problem is to develop model solutions for coordinated activities for inclusive education in Poland²⁵.

We are currently working on a model of intersectoral cooperation for the benefit of children, students, and families, notably support for processes taking place in local communities, such as creating and coordinating local support networks. A well-conducted diagnosis of the resources of the local environment is the foundation for implementing measures to support inclusive education. Cooperation of advocacy organizations, and NGOs with public institutions, taking into account the voice of the stakeholders themselves, is the starting point for further actions. It is also important to prepare local government managers, directors, and educational, social welfare, and healthcare unit staff, forming local support networks.

By way of conclusion

Taking into account the issues indicated earlier, the following key elements can be identified for the effective implementation of solutions for quality education for all:

- analysis of institutional resources, forms of community support, and programs implemented at the local level by public institutions and NGOs jointly in the health, education, and social welfare sectors,
- integration of activities around the child, student, and family, understood as combining into a single instrument of support the many existing organizational forms of support for the development of children from birth to the end of compulsory schooling, taking into account the transition to subsequent educational stages in a smooth manner,

²⁴ Widawska, E. (2022), Human rights-based model of disability in the light of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, in: M. Bernasiewicz, M. Noszczyk-Bernasiewicz (eds.), *Wyzwania pedagogiczne w XXI wieku: Zagrożenia społeczne - Edukacja - Terapia* (Jubilee volume on the 35th anniversary of the scientific work of Professor Anna Nowak), Wydawnictwo Edukacyjne „Akapit”, Toruń, pp. 287-304.

²⁵ An innovation and implementation project on functional assessment. The project consists of research and development of model solutions for locally provided intersectoral support for children, students and families based on functional assessment methodology using the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health - ICF. Contract No. MEiN/2022/DWEW/1070 Funded by the Ministry of Education and Science.

- implementation of intersectoral cooperation and coordination of activities, especially in the areas of health, family assistance, and social assistance with the forms of support offered in the educational system, in which the child functions continuously for many years of his life,
- activation of support resources located in the environment of the child, student, and family on the principle of empowerment,
- implementing a process of personalization of support by adjusting the type and scope of assistance to the actual needs of the child, student, family, and non-family environment,
- reducing procedural burdens in accessing support,
- effective use of local resources and increasing the quality of the assistance provided, thanks to the consistency of goals and synchronization of assistance interventions (synergy effect).

Referring to the theme of the 10th International Conference, within the framework of which this discussion is presented, „The State of the European Union - a need for unity and solidarity“, the need for unity and solidarity concerning the issue of inclusive education should, in our opinion, be a priority topic. Their implementation can be carried out in the framework of international cooperation and concern, among other things:

- European programs of methodological support for teachers and educators in mainstream institutions,
- raising the competence of teachers to work in a diverse group,
- shaping social attitudes that support inclusion processes, for example, through transnational campaigns or social advertising.

Building social cohesion, shown in the above text on the example of inclusive education, has a much broader dimension. This is particularly evident now in the ongoing full-scale war in Ukraine and the situation of a group of almost 190,000 Ukrainian children and young people studying in Polish schools. Education that ensures inclusion and equal rights for every person (whether this applies to a person with a disability, a migrant experience, or any other differentiating characteristic) is vital for individual countries and the European Union system as a whole.

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