

## Inclusive education: a structure with strong foundations

Segregation, integration and inclusive education are three notions which must be differentiated and correctly understood for the purposes of this synopsis and reflection on the Polish system concerning the education of persons with disabilities of various types and degrees.

In our country, the dominant solution is the so-called special education, that is in schools dedicated to disabled children and adolescents. In Europe, such a model is currently considered to be segregated education, i.e. separating non-disabled, or, putting it bluntly, healthy and ill, children from each other. This antinomy is a perfect illustration of the division into those better and worse which follows from such a notion. The social costs of segregated education are very high, since disabled children and adolescents stand no chance of normal functioning, competing and developing together with their peers. This leads to their poorer social skills and often results in failed attempts to get to university, and so they are left with qualifications that are not sufficient to undertake more ambitious forms of employment. They usually end up working in the protected sector, which makes them isolated from the rest of society even further. However, disabled persons often fail to find any employment whatsoever, and so all the taxpayers must bear the financial consequences of the fact.

Furthermore, the segregated model is harmful because it is responsible for the very low level of public awareness as regards disability and the daily life of persons with disabilities. The general disability awareness cannot possibly improve because kindergarten children do not see their disabled peers, adolescents do not meet other school-goers with disabilities, and university students in turn meet the very few disabled persons who have somehow managed to break through all the barricades erected for them consciously or not at the previous stages in the education process. The low level of disability awareness in society is also shown by the fact that parents of non-disabled children are often reluctant to have them mixed with their disabled peers. The reasons for that vary and are not the subject of this article, but suffice it to say that as things stand the vicious circle of a lack of understanding and openness to new solutions keeps turning faster rather than slowing down.

To address such problems, a half-hearted attempt has been made in the form of the so-called integrated classes or integrative schools. Integrated education is also mentioned in the regulation of the Minister of National Education which entered into force on 1 September this

year.<sup>1</sup> Although referring to the organisation of education, instruction and care in mainstream or integrative facilities, it is at the same time inspired by the thinking that follows the ideas behind special-needs teaching, which makes the possibility to provide integrated education conditional upon the improvement efforts “targeting a special group of pupils carried out in a special manner<sup>2</sup>”. The regulation indicates the need to develop individual educational-therapeutic programmes for pupils who are disabled, socially maladjusted and at the risk of such maladjustment. The programmes specify the range of educational requirements stemming from the syllabus given the pupil’s individual needs, as well as the range of specialist revalidation and rehabilitation intervention for those who are socially maladjusted. Such pupils then become persons “requiring special educational conditions” described in detail in the official certificates stating their need to have special education<sup>3</sup>. In the document, a team of professionals, including a physician, psychologist and educationalist, “specify the type of the child’s developmental difficulties and deviations that require the application of a special organisation of work”<sup>4</sup>. On that basis they recommend that the pupil be offered one of the following forms of special-needs education: in a mainstream, integrative or special school. They also formulate conclusions on, for instance, the conditions of the fulfilment of the educational needs, forms of stimulation, revalidation, therapy, or improvement efforts targeting specific pupils. Yet it should be the school that promotes the idea of diversity in education and move, as postulated in the Madrid Declaration: *away from a focus on merely individual impairments [of disabled persons] and towards removing barriers, revising social norms, policies, cultures and promoting a supportive and accessible environment* for all.

There is much room for improvement also as regards the lowering of examination standards for deaf secondary-school leavers taking their graduation examination, which is one of the proposals by the Central Examination Board<sup>5</sup>. The preparation of easier language material in examination sheets for Polish for deaf examinees is actually not the provision of

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<sup>1</sup> Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 17 November 2010 on the conditions of providing education, instruction and care for disabled and socially maladjusted children and youth in kindergartens, schools and mainstream or integration classes. The previous regulation by the Minister of National Education and Sport (MENiS) of 18 January 2005 refers only to special education.

<sup>2</sup> This subject is discussed more extensively by Grzegorz Szumski in: *Integracyjne kształcenie niepełnosprawnych*, issued by Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN in 2009.

<sup>3</sup> MENiS regulation of 12 February 2001 on the certification of the need to provide special education or individual tutoring to children and young learners as well as the issuance of opinions concerning the need for early support of the child’s development and detailed rules for referring children and young learners to special education or individual tutoring regimes as amended pursuant to MENiS regulation of 29 January 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted from Annex 1 to the MENiS regulation of 29 January 2003. (item 192).

<sup>5</sup> This proposal was formulated in the *Communication of the Chairperson the Central Examination Board of 31 August 2011 on the ways of adapting the conditions and forms of delivery of the secondary-school graduation examination in the 2011/2012 school year to the needs of graduates with special educational needs, including those disabled, socially maladjusted and at the risk of social maladjustment*.

equal educational opportunities for them and will not replace the need to have access to effective education, e.g. making use of Polish sign language<sup>6</sup>.

Various European countries have also gone through the stage of integrated education yet the notion was strongly criticised there as some solutions had been created with just disabled learners in mind.<sup>7</sup> It was experienced too frequently that in integrative classes the overall level of education would go down, which was associated with the presence of disabled persons rather than systemic deficiencies in educational support for pupils that should be delivered in a way ensuring an equal level across all the classes. Far from perfect was also the training support system for teachers expected to work with disabled children and adolescents<sup>8</sup>.

The notion of integration has also become part of various cultural, charity and sporting events, which place emphasis on disability in a way that is frequently overdone and artificial, discouraging non-disabled persons from participation. Over time, such events become dedicated to disabled persons and those around them only, thus becoming segregated. The glorification of disability after all does not lead to natural integration, it just means building a wall but on the other side this time around. Disability should not stand out either negatively or positively. It is just a feature one of many, a way of life. The integrated model then eventually leads to the illusory step forward, which too often requires taking two steps back, towards segregation, that is.

That is why an alternative to the two notions described above has appeared, the so-called **social model**<sup>9</sup> promoted, *inter alia*, by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons

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<sup>6</sup> The research conducted at Warsaw University (the Faculty of Polish Studies) presented there at the conference on 26 June 2008 clearly showed that the level of secondary-school graduation examination for deaf learners should be deemed too low. Texts for deaf students do not concern problem-based tasks but uncomplicated phenomena. They do not check their ability to interpret texts and no specialist terminology is used. In a lengthy written piece it is obligatory to refer to just one chapter of the source text whilst hearing persons are expected to refer to three. The selected source text concerns most obvious subjects from the canon of required reading. No selection is made of poetry or drama.

<sup>7</sup> The tendency to extend *the special education infrastructure in mainstream schools* is considered to have been a mistake of *the integration strategy (...)* In countries where that strategy has been implemented intensively very many pupils use special assistance unnecessarily, or even to their detriment. (G. Szumski 2009, p. 24).

<sup>8</sup> More on disadvantages of the integration notion can be found in an interview by Agata Stawska with Simoni Symeonidou from the Cyprus University in Nicosia, see *Inclusive Education as a Challenge for the Social Model* [in:] I. Białek, M. Bylica, D. Nowak-Adamczyk, M. Perdeus (ed.) "Bulletin of the Jagiellonian University Disability Support Service", issue 4/2011, p. 22. The electronic version of the publication available at: [ww.bon.uj.edu.pl/publikacje/biuletyn-bon-uj](http://ww.bon.uj.edu.pl/publikacje/biuletyn-bon-uj).

<sup>9</sup> The social model of disability emphasises the fact that disability is a result of an interaction between the disabled person and his/her environment. This means the disability source is placed outside the given person, that is in society, as well as putting emphasis on empowering the disabled person. In specialist literature this attitude is presented as opposed to the medical model which perceives disability as a personal tragedy. Following the medical model, making it possible for disabled persons to live as members of society can work exclusively through adopting the disabled person to the norm by means of specialist influence and not – like in the social model – through changing the conditions in the environment. (C. Barnes, G. Mercer, T. Shakespeare, 2010;

with Disabilities<sup>10</sup>. For the purpose of this article of most interest is the approach to education defined in Article 24 of the Convention. This is inclusive education, assuming that the mainstream system of education will be fully prepared for disabled children, pupils or students (T. Loreman, J. Deppeler, D. Harvey, 2005), not a reformed special-needs education but a restructured mainstream education (D. Kerzner Lipsky, A. Gartner, 1999). This ambitious notion does mean, however, that the general education system must be thoroughly prepared for the change or else the novel concept will not work. The social model, embracing inclusive education and full participation of disabled persons in social life, are notions which make a foundation of the modern state paying equal attention to all its citizens. In other words, a state assuming that its society is highly diverse and organising its life in such a way as to predict in advance the needs of various minorities, the largest of which, usually around 10%, being persons with disabilities.

Such a prediction can be simply illustrated by the example of a modern public building. At the design stage as much attention as possible should be given to all the needs of the prospective users. They will be, for example, senior citizens, mothers with children and disabled persons. It is important to assume that all such users are not just recipients of content provided in such a building but they can also provide it themselves. It is easy to neglect it, as evidenced by many buildings, for instance university auditoriums built with accessible seats for the students but the podium which remains inaccessible and with steps leading to it. Such steps next to the lectern are symbolic indeed, showing where a wall still stands between disabled persons and the rest of society. Such steps could be treated as the dividing line between the models, segregated or integrated and social. This is a mental barrier of course: a disabled person can already listen to lectures or some other provided input, this has seeped into our perception and we do not mind. A disabled person, however, does not yet deliver lectures or provide any input because no space for him/her has been envisioned at the lectern. Once it has been envisioned, the physical and mental barriers will disappear simultaneously and then the social model will have been materialised in all its shining glory.

The planning of the structure of such a building, predicting the users' needs and implementing a solution not featuring the steps leading to the lectern, can also be used as a

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educational materials for academic teachers developed by the consortium of the European DARE project: [www.DareProject.eu](http://www.DareProject.eu)).

<sup>10</sup> The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities of 13 December 2006, signed by Poland on 30 March 2007 and not yet ratified.

metaphor in the case of the educational system and educational support for disabled persons and teachers working with them<sup>11</sup>.

The integration model, the beginnings of which date back to the 1980s<sup>12</sup>, has failed to provide what was hoped for because, for example, mainstream education was not ready for it, and the foundations of the old notion of segregation were used. The decision-making system did not work as the decision makers did not have sufficient knowledge of disability. The level of education was going down as the teachers were not given opportunities for improving their professional qualifications in how to educate disabled persons effectively. Parents of non-disabled children did not want their children to attend the same class/school as disabled children because no-one had ever explained to them the nature of disability and that because of such co-existence rather than losing out their children could gain a lot in terms of empathy, being open to other people and the generally understood tolerance, which are features never in much abundance. Whatever did not automatically work in integrated education indicates what should be done to make sure the notion of inclusive education can be implemented successfully.

First, decision makers must become familiar with the notion of disability and use support from experts. It is not enough to provide one's signature under a sum of money dedicated to building a system. One must be first certain that the goal the funds go towards is socially useful and implementable, whilst the system has been made fit to absorb the money and expending it in compliance with the priorities set. Lower-level officials must also have some awareness of the projected goal, yet the key link is teachers themselves.

They argue they are not prepared for disabled persons attending standard schools and classes and they are right. For their part, teachers from special schools claim the integration exercise has not worked and that is why disabled children should come back to special schools (which they are doing indeed). Unaware of all this, decision makers avoid the problem and so we take two steps backwards, that is towards segregation. This puts Poland in opposition to European policies and the provisions of Article 24 of the said UN Convention.

Why not assume that because we know why integration has failed the process of building inclusive education can be launched on the basis of the mistakes analysed? If a building collapses, rather than proving that a shed is a better abode, one usually erects a new improved one with stronger foundations.

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<sup>11</sup> In the system of inclusive education, the responsibility for educating disabled persons lies mainly with teachers delivering classes. Their appropriate preparation for such work should constitute an integral part of the university curriculum (G. L. Porter 1997).

<sup>12</sup> In 1989, the first integrative group of kindergarten children was set up in Warsaw ([www.szkolnictwo.pl](http://www.szkolnictwo.pl))

And so we are with mental barriers again, our steps leading to the lectern; It is necessary to dare get rid of them once and for all in the minds of all those who are important actors preparing the foundations for the operational system of education in Poland.

Let us then return to planning. The people taking part in the implementation of inclusive education need the knowhow and the precise setting of the goal they want to reach. We should then define the groups to be targeted. They are lower and higher level decision makers as well as teachers. The next stage is to establish an operational budget adequate for the goal to be attained assuming all the involved know how to use the dedicated funds well. The final stage of the task is practical implementation. All this should be reasonably spread over time. In this way our building without barriers can be erected, that is inclusive education, also free from the symbolic steps leading to the lectern. The goal is not too romantic or unrealistic, just as it is not unrealistic to imagine that all the buildings being built in Poland should be free from any barriers, including steps next the lectern, from the very start – it is just a matter of a good design and good architects. That is why architects must be educated and the design of the building duly developed. If we prepare decision makers and teachers, develop a good design together and find right contractors, then the building called inclusive education will not collapse the way integration did (yet it had not been designed by specialists). And if it does not collapse, it will be used, it will become part of society and win over more users for its cause. And it is good so as the path towards the changes making a “society of tomorrow”<sup>13</sup> leads through education. That is why we need a structure with exceptionally solid foundations.

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<sup>13</sup> The notion of a “society of tomorrow” was presented in an interview by Ireneusz Białek with Gerard Lefranc see *Managers of the Future. An interview with Gerard Lefranc, Director of Mission Insertion, a Thales department in charge of disability policy* [in:] I. Białek, M. Bylica, D. Nowak-Adamczyk, M. Perdeus (ed.) “Bulletin of the Jagiellonian University Disability Support Service”, issue 4/2011, p. 37. The electronic version of the publication available at: [ww.bon.uj.edu.pl/publikacje/biuletyn-bon-uj](http://ww.bon.uj.edu.pl/publikacje/biuletyn-bon-uj).

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support of the child's development and detailed rules for referring children and young learners to special education or individual tutoring regimes

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