

## The project method as a form of teaching people with disabilities

Mateusz Smieszek <sup>1</sup>

Manuscript information:

Received: April 15, 2018

Accepted: May 12, 2018

### Abstract

The paper aims at presenting a look at ways, and forms of using the project method in teaching people with disabilities. I will analyze the usefulness of the project method in different areas of education of people with disabilities. The study also briefly comments on the most significant features that describe educational projects. Subsequently, it will go on to benefits of using the project method in education. The paper focuses primarily on how the project as an element of teaching affects the development of students with disabilities. In the further part of the work, it will also consider forms of project in education. The last part of the paper mentions several important results of research which pertain to the possibility of using project method technologies in education.

**Keywords:** Project method, education, people with disabilities, teaching method

### Author 1

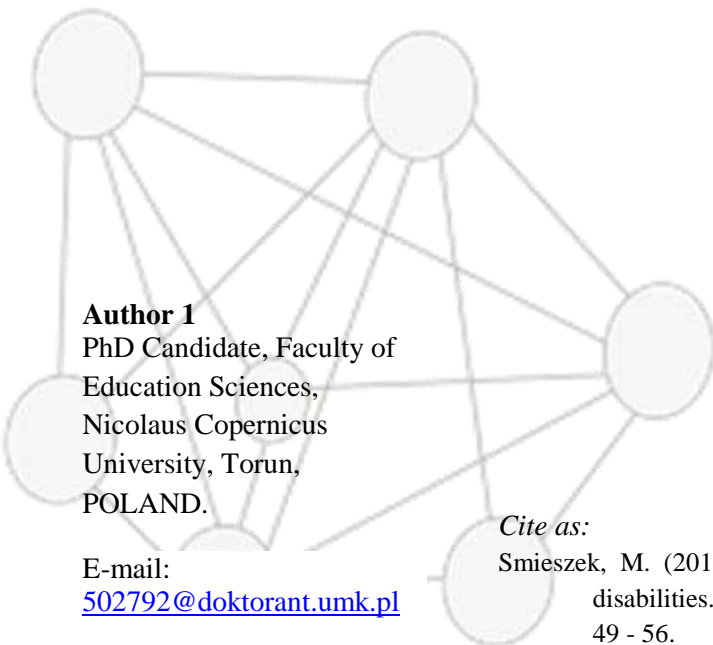
PhD Candidate, Faculty of  
Education Sciences,  
Nicolaus Copernicus  
University, Torun,  
POLAND.

E-mail:

[502792@doktorant.umk.pl](mailto:502792@doktorant.umk.pl)

### Cite as:

Smieszek, M. (2018). The project method as a form of teaching people with disabilities. *European Journal of Educational and Social Sciences*, 3 (1), 49 - 56.



## INTRODUCTION

The project method is more often than before used in the education process of children, adolescents as well as adults. Teachers perceive the possibility of using this method as an element of shaping school skills or social competences of their pupils. The project should also appear in syllabuses of people with disabilities. The project method has many features that can positively influence on this group of people. In this article I will put emphasis on a detailed look at the project method in the context of educational and therapeutic work with people with disabilities. It is also worth noting the broader context of student engagement within which disabled student involvement sits. The study will provide a description of opinions of theoreticians and practitioners. This paper focuses on researchers who presented a scientific view on the project as a form of education for people with disability in their research work. The paper also attempts to distinguish the main subject areas by conducting a detailed analysis of literature regarding the project method .

### Project method - theoretical analysis

There are various definitions of projects. The authors analyze many aspects of this teaching method. The classic definition of projects was created by Kilpatrick (1918), for whom the project is every bold, planned action which is performed in a social environment. A noteworthy look at the project was proposed by McCorry (2009), who defines the project as any planned action, venture. Potocka and Nowak (2002) describe the project with respect to education. They perceive it as a teaching method which has an impact on various skills and integrating cross-curricular knowledge . According to the authors cited, the essence of the project method is to strengthen independence and cooperation. It is also worth presenting a proposal of a project description provided by Szymański (2000), who created a comprehensive, extended definition. As has been stated by the author, the project method is “a method of education that boils down to the fact that a team of students initiates, plans, and implements certain projects and assesses their performance” (p.19).

The authors of the publications about projects emphasize one relevant element. For the proper implementation of projects the activity of people engaged on this project is a necessary component. Therefore, projects should refer to the action of participants of the activities. The project method is a significant factor in conducting inclusive education, which is extremely important in the context of working with people with disabilities. Inclusive education is a basis for shaping right social attitudes of disabled students. The project can be extremely useful in this area. Buchnat (2013) addresses it in the following way: "In an activating teaching strategy, the teacher together with the student creates a plan of action, ensuring optimal learning conditions for the child's needs, taking into account their interests, potential, and expectations. An example of a method of working in an activating education strategy is the project method, which is characterized by the greatest interactivity, and at the same time combines other methods and techniques of teaching" (p.34).

At the very beginning the project appears as a certain idea, thought, and then it is transformed into specific structured activities. A given person's way of thinking determines her/his approach to project activities. People characterized by a project approach in their thinking are focused primarily on innovation and problem-solving. This fact is emphasized by many authors, including Dykcik and Szychowiak (2002), who show the need to use alternative methods of teaching in education: "Innovative concepts, principles, and methods of teaching are increasingly orienting education and rehabilitation strategies to the subjective role of the family and the activation of local communities and the environment of disabled and socially maladjusted individuals living the nearest" (p.9).

Educational projects implemented in a school environment have specific characteristics. Projects of this type must have unambiguous features. A detailed description of the most significant elements is presented by Chałas (2000). According to the author, the projects have primarily set goals and precise implementation methods. In addition, they have fixed deadlines and subsequent stages. The projects also use certain resources. As well, it is important that they have definite recipients and are implemented by specific people. One should also mention that the projects have established ways to measure to what extent the assumed goals have been achieved.

The stages of project thinking were presented by Elise Roy (2015) during her speech at the TedxMidAtlantic conference in September 2015. The author made a very thought-provoking description of a project-thinking pattern. The author knows that being disabled gives people unique way of experiencing world and gives also new perspective of thinking and creating projects. According to her, the starting point is defining, perceiving a problem and the impact of this problem on social functioning. After analyzing the problem, the next step is to observe people in real situations and check whether these problems are reflected in real needs and desires. If so, then in the next phase, we should move on to proposing as many different solutions as possible. And then there is the creation of a prototype, or a scheme of further project activities. The last phase is the implementation of activities and checking whether the proposed scheme has a chance to survive in a given environment and will be used in the future.

The educational project is realized in stages. In the case of a complex project, it should be divided into parts. The implementation of the project with one activity is not achievable. The dynamics of project management often brings the necessity to introduce corrections in the initially developed plan. It is extremely relevant to focus on flexibility and to be aware of the role of random situations that may conflict with the timely execution of responsibilities. In the project method teacher is in specific position. The teacher is seen as a facilitator and helps students during the process of thinking and creating new project.

In the agenda of a teacher working with disabled students, the project may occur at the beginning as well as at the end of the program implementation cycle. Teachers can also offer students work on a project that will allow practicing important cross-curricular skills as well as acquiring new information. It is then a great way to summarize, demonstrate the skills of applying knowledge in practice.

Projects implemented while working with people with intellectual disabilities can take various forms. These may be, for example, research projects and local action projects (Potocka, Nowak, 2002). A research project is related to problem procedures. During its implementation, a student tries to solve a problem in a way that reflects a scientific procedure (at the proper level of the scale). A schoolchild recognizes the issue, puts forward hypotheses, designs ways to verify them, gathers data, compiles them, and draws conclusions. A local action project rests on specific actions performed at school or in a local environment. The effect of its implementation may be, for example, building electronic systems, renovating school playgrounds, planting trees in parks, etc. Students acquire knowledge through experience, i.e. a practical action.

The method of projects used among students with an intellectual disability brings many benefits. First of all, it allows learning through activity and action. It increases the efficiency of work with students, particularly those with intellectual disabilities. The social environment has a major influence on the development of disabled students. When preparing a project for students, a research group chaired by Stankiewicz (2015) claimed that this method would be used as follows: "We want to persuade teachers to show the world in new ways, to get school pupils fascinated by natural phenomena, and to encourage them to acquire new skills" (p.5). The researchers argue for a new approach to school education.

The project strengthens competences of disabled students in many different aspects. Cooperative activities integrate the class, arouse friendships, partner relations and willingness to be with each other. The implementation of the project becomes a natural way of cooperation, mutual support for students, teamwork, shared responsibility and partnership. The project is a very useful tool in the hands of a good teacher who shows how to learn cross-curricular skills. Students acquire important social skills by making individual and group decisions, dealing with conflict situations, listening and understanding others, expressing or defending their own opinions, seeking compromise solutions, sharing responsibility and assessing their own or colleagues' work. The method gives also an opportunity to learn work organization, planning - determining precise and real goals and designing tasks leading to their implementation, the effectiveness of action - predicting difficulties and effectively overcoming them. Zhylykybay, Magzhan, Suinzhanova, Balaubekov, Adiyeva (2014) addresses it in the following way: "(...) this method is the natural way of realizing the credit teaching system, it is very important in forming the students' thinking and teaching the speaking culture, establishing the abilities of a person." (p.621).

## RESEARCH REVIEW

In the following part of the work, I present my own analysis of selected pedagogical research related to project method. The main purpose of this literature review is to gather information about possible models of using the project method in inclusive settings and the effects of these approaches on pupils or peers. Using the method of projects when working

with people with disabilities is an issue that is discussed outside the mainstream of pedagogical research. This solution is not very popular in educational studies.

Be that as it may, there are studies which aim at checking the suitability and use of this method while conducting educational, diagnostic or therapeutic activities with people with disabilities. These analyses focus on various areas and are conducted in a wide range of groups. The authors consider the project method in relation to the complete development of a child or an adult. Some research are analyzed in the context of one specific segment of the school functioning of students with disabilities. These are, for example, studies analyzing the use of the project method to improve communication skills or social competences. I would like to present instances of such discussions.

From the point of view of a researcher of educational measures, it is important to pay attention to the project method influence young people. Kamps, Barbetta, Leonard, and Delquadri (1994) examined the impact of the use of the project method on school education as an element of social inclusion of autistic students. The project was carried out in the form of peer tutoring and involved the cooperation of non-disabled and disabled students. The results of the study showed that the project implemented in this form had a positive effect on social skills of both non-disabled and autistic students. In line with modern educational practice, they provide significant data.

A noteworthy example may also be research carried out by Buchnat (2013). The author investigated the knowledge and awareness of possibilities of using the project method by primary education teachers. Buchnat (2013) focused on the use of projects as a form of support for the school functioning of children with special educational needs. In this group, the author included students with intellectual disabilities. Buchnat (2013) conducted a study surveying a group of 60 teachers. The results presented by the author show that many teachers (30%) do not know anything about the project method. The other teachers (who know the method) rarely use it in their work. This is mainly due to the lack of knowledge and experience concerning the use of activating methods (including project methods) in didactic work.

In their research a team of researchers from Kazakhstan (2014) focused primarily on the analysis of benefits of using the project method in teaching. The authors of the study observed that the project can be helpful in many areas of school education. The project method contributes, among others, to the improvement of the quality of knowledge acquisition, strengthens the ability to solve problems and increases communication and cultural competences. They write about use of project method: "The project method has some peculiarities; with its systematicity and focus it can influence the quality of teaching, show them student's knowledge and qualification clear and exactly, easy to evaluate, direct to determine the students' competence formation and future development opportunities." (p. 621).

Abdieva (2009) has presented another significant area of human development that can be shaped by using the project method while working with students. The author of the

research focused on determining communication skills. Topics related to language teaching are a problematic issue as far as work with students with disabilities is concerned. Communication skills are often associated with many different difficulties that may interfere with the learning process. These may be physical (e.g. sight or hearing) problems. As well as intellectual difficulties are concerning students with intellectual disabilities. Therefore, the use of traditional teaching methods may prove to be ineffective when working with students with disabilities. As results show, the project method can be an interesting solution in such situations, which positively affects the development of students' language skills.

Similar research was carried out by Stevens and Slavin (1995), who investigated the possibility of using the project method to improve reading and writing skills of students with disabilities. The project implemented at school included reading together by non-disabled and disabled students, loud reading and storytelling. Teachers in contrast groups used their standard procedures or the project method for monitoring student progress, providing student feedback, and planning their instruction. The results of the study pointed to the advancement of the disabled students in using vocabulary, reading and writing skills and self-expression.

Self, Benning, Marston, and Magnusson (1991) conducted a study which aimed at checking the effectiveness of the project method in the education of students who are subject to the risk of school failure. The authors carried out their research for three years in a public school in Minneapolis. They spent a great amount of time analyzing this subject. Their activities consisted in comparing educational achievements in groups in which teachers used the project method instead of traditional forms of teaching. The results of the research have shown that the usage of the project has a positive effect on students from groups at risk of school failure. The authors also point out that the use of the project method has a constructive impact on teachers who improve their communication skills through the project and demonstrate better involvement in activities.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that the experience of scientists using an alternative approach suggests that after some improvement of the methodological skills of the teacher, the project method may become a very valuable source of knowledge about the functioning of people with disabilities. I have chosen this subject because it was discussed in few studies. Most of all, the analysis of the research leads me to one important reflection. Results of research proves the great effectiveness of using the project method in teaching disabled students. The project method is innovative and it provides a different perspective on the issue of school teaching. In special education, a flexible and diverse approach is recommended.

This method allows more freedom in choosing a particular model of teaching depending on the level of development and needs of students. In this context the project method is extremely useful due to its specific features (focus on independence, cooperation, involvement). Because of this fact teachers should be more aware of benefits of the usage of

the project method. As indicated in the above-mentioned research, the project method brings benefits in many different areas of activity. To conclude, I would like to say that the use of the project method in the education of people with disabilities opens up new perspectives in special education research. Therefore, it is worth submitting this form of educational and therapeutic work to a deeper scientific analysis.

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