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Psychological and Pedagogical Care for Children with Special Educational Needs – a System in Poland

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Abstract

The number of students with special educational needs continues to increase in Polish mainstream schools. The obligatory psychological and pedagogical support for children with special educational needs in Poland operates on the basis of normative acts developed by the Ministry of Education. This assistance is targeted at students of Polish state schools (primary and secondary), which also teach children and young adults with this kind of needs within the framework of inclusive education. The study in quantitative strategies (quantitative research) was conducted among the teaching staff in Polish schools located in large cities. The number of participants in the sample was approximately 130 teachers and the instrument used was a questionnaire prepared by the authors. The research concerned the effectiveness of psychological and pedagogical assistance provided to pupils with special educational needs. The research results indicate that the current scheme in Poland requires new legislation and urgent interventions, especially in terms of qualifications of teachers who work with pupils with special educational needs.

Key words: psychological and pedagogical care, special educational needs, inclusive education, support.

Introduction

The concept of special educational needs (SEN) has been popular since 1978 owing to *The Warnock Report "Special Educational Needs"*, which pointed to particular educational diversity and introduced the notion of *a pupil with special educational needs*. In this report, the author emphasized three main points:

- “1 / The concept of ‘special educational needs’ has, on balance, been unhelpful. It was introduced for positive reasons: to help break down the barriers between ‘handicapped’ and ‘ordinary’ children ...
- 2 / Statutory assessments and statements of need were introduced to ‘protect’ children with more complex and significant difficulties, and to ensure their needs were met, whether they were in special schools or mainstream settings.
- 3 / Inclusion has gone too far” (Gray, 2011).

Therefore, such an introduction of the concept of *special educational needs* has become an implication for theoretical considerations and practical solutions, including the legal ones. The term *educational need* is differently defined by psychologists and educators all over the world. This definition ambiguity is also associated with the existence of another term of *developmental need*. This specific definitional chaos results from the fact that not every individual starts another developmental phase at the same time as others. This is especially true for children and adolescents (Brzezińska et al., 2014). Classes and class groups include children and adolescents whose intellectual, sensory, emotional and social potential diverges from the so-called development standard. Therefore, they should be provided with special conditions to meet their individual educational needs. We assume that individuals are at different stages of development (Baltes, 1997) where they need individual educational reality due to their specific disorders, deficits and differences. Special conditions are essential for this group of pupils/students to achieve a sense wellbeing or thriving (O’Brien, 2010). Educational need becomes synonymous with the conditions necessary to achieve well-being/thriving in the learning process (developing specific learning outcomes) (Brzezińska et al., 2014). Special educational need is related to an individual, who, due to their disorders, cannot acquire appropriate learning outcomes under standard educational conditions. And here comes the key question. Where does a pupil with special educational needs perform compulsory education? Should they get education in segregation or inclusion education system? (Cigman, 2007). It seems that in contemporary Europe this problem

has been expressly settled in favor of inclusion in education. According to the National Association of Head Teachers in their *Special Schools*:

“Inclusion is a process that maximizes the entitlement of all pupils to a broad, relevant and stimulating curriculum, which is delivered in the environment that will have the greatest impact on their learning. All schools, whether special or mainstream, should reflect a culture in which the institution adapts to meet the needs of its pupils and is provided with resources to enable this to happen” (*Special School*, 2005, p. 1).

The same document contains one of the most fundamental statements concerning modern societies, especially those of the European Union:

“Inclusive schooling is essential to the development of an inclusive society. It requires an education service that ensures provision and funding is there to enable all pupils to be educated in the most appropriate setting. This will be the one in which they will be fully integrated into the life of their school community and give them a sense of belonging and achieving” (*Special School*, 2005, p.1)

Pupils/students with special educational needs are categorized and the process is similar in many countries. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report of 2004, the following categories were among the special educational needs: partially sighted, blind, deaf, physical disabilities, learning difficulties (severe, moderate, light), emotional and behavioral difficulties or young offenders (Powell, 2016). Mary Warnock, the author of the famous report, has decided to revise the status of special educational needs (Warnock, Norwich, 2010). She argues that the criteria determining SEN status are unclear. The author’s criticism is aimed at the local governments’ policy towards British schools with SEN pupils. These schools are not sufficiently financed and equipped with special equipment or qualified specialists. The state policy towards the problem of SEN pupils is merely the centralization of management and funding in British schools, and has nothing to do with the actual well-being of SEN pupils. Mary Warnock’s reflection – “SEN is not one phenomenon, but many” (Warnock, Norwich, 2010, p. 38) is right and can successfully guide the inclusion of SEN pupils. “We must give up the idea that SEN is the name of a unified class of students at whom, in a uniform way, the policy of inclusion can be directed” (Warnock, Norwich, 2010, p. 34). In her publication on special education needs from a new perspective, Mary Warnock devotes much attention to psychological and pedagogical support and assistance. According to the author, lack of professional help contributes to the fact that a number of children with SEN are not included in mainstream schools,

causing serious social consequences in their adult life. Mary Warnock criticizes the state policy towards SEN and inclusion. She proposes new legal solutions.

Introduction – SEN and the system in Poland

In 2010, a normative act was introduced in Poland for mandatory psychological and pedagogical assistance for children in kindergartens and pupils of state schools. This was a regulation the Ministry of National Education of 17 November on the rules of providing psychological and pedagogical assistance in public kindergartens, schools and institutions (Journal of Laws of 2010, No. 228, item 1487), which bound Polish kindergartens, primary and middle schools to provide psychological and pedagogical assistance and support for children and youth with dysfunctions, disabilities, or deviations from developmental, social or legal standards. This assistance consisted of identifying and meeting individual developmental and educational needs of an individual resulting from: disability, social maladjustment, a threat of social maladjustment, specific abilities, specific learning difficulties, linguistic disorders, chronic condition, crises or traumatic disorders, educational failures, neglect in community or adaptive difficulties generated by cultural differences. It was a novel solution (in Polish conditions), which precisely targeted child's educational and development needs, however, educational institutions faced the problem of unprepared staff. Polish schools did not have and so far do not have appropriate staff of specialists who can provide professional psychological and pedagogical assistance. The regulation in question was modified and today its amendment of 30 April 2013 is in force (Journal of Laws 2013, item 532). In Polish institutions there is still shortage of qualified staff who provide professional help mentioned in the normative act. In every Polish school there are pupils with special educational and development needs and to put it simply – with multiple social problems (Bogdanowicz, 2012). These problems result not only from objective reasons described in the Polish normative act on psychological and pedagogical assistance, but also due to other reasons that are present in the contemporary world surrounding children and young people.

The Polish education system for SEN pupils/students envisages the possibility of education in a mainstream school, integration school (integration class in a state school) and in a special school. In formal terms, a decision where a child with special needs will be educated depends on the parents or legal guardians. In reality, however, it is not so simple. Not every Polish state school is sufficiently prepared to accept willingly a SEN student and so to abide by

the existing law. The Polish law envisages that at every stage of education we can encounter a SEN student. However, such a student does not always complete educational stage in a state school because of objective obstacles, such as individual abilities. The basis for creating friendly environment for educating students with special educational needs is: teachers' knowledge, their motivation to work with SEN students, acceptance and genuine tolerance of otherness, availability of professional teaching aids and elimination of school barriers, both mental and architectural (Gajdzica 2013; O'Regan, 2005; Speck, 2013; Todd, 2003).

Work methods

Participants

In total, 128 individuals were targeted in the survey. The teachers participating in the study worked in two provinces (Kujawy-Pomerania Province – 49% and Lubuskie Province – 51%) in primary state schools with pupils from the first (48%) and second (52%) stage of education. The group was also diverse in terms of gender, age, length of service and level of teacher's promotion.

The majority of respondents were women (91%), which is due to the feminisation of the teaching profession. Their ages ranged from 20 to over 60 years of age, with more than half of respondents aged 46 to 60 (51%), and almost a third of respondents aged 36 to 45 (32%). The smallest subgroup was constituted by teachers aged over 60 (3%). More than half of the respondents had long teaching experience, over 20 years (50%). In the sample, there were relatively few individuals with short professional experience, i.e. from one to four years (6%) and from 5 to 10 years (9%). Most of the respondents had the highest (in Poland) degree of professional advancement, i.e. certified teacher (63%), and one fourth of the respondents (26%) were nominated teachers. The lowest proportion of the questioned had the lowest level of professional advancement, i.e. a trainee (4%).

Recruitment

The selection of respondents for the test sample was conducted basing on the three criteria (Rubacha, 2008, p. 124). The following teachers were selected for the study: (1) working in state primary schools; (2) from the two provinces i.e. the Kujawy-Pomerania and Lubuskie province; (3) working with pupils from the first (grades I–III) and second (grades IV–VI) stages of education.

In the Kujawy-Pomerania Province, the study was carried out in primary schools in Toruń and in the vicinity, while in the Lubuskie Province it was car-

ried out in Zielona Góra and its vicinity. In total, more than 400 questionnaires were distributed to the institutions to be completed by teachers. 128 completed questionnaires were completed and returned (63 interviews from the Kujawy-Pomerania Province and 65 questionnaires from Lubuskie Province).

Objectives

The purpose of the study was to obtain opinions of primary state school teachers on the functioning of psychological and pedagogical support system for pupils with special educational needs, especially for those with various disabilities.

In the course of the study, the answers to the following questions were sought:

1. Are state school teachers interested in psychological and pedagogical support systems for pupils with special educational needs?
2. How do respondents assess psychological and pedagogical assistance offered to pupils with disability by a state school?
3. Are there any special education specialists in the field of special pedagogy in schools where they work?
4. In the opinion of the surveyed teachers, should pupils with disabilities study in mainstream schools?
5. In the opinion of respondents, are teachers working in state schools able to meet individual developmental and educational needs of pupils with disability?
6. Are the teachers included in the study able to tailor requirements to individual developmental and educational needs of pupils, irrespective of their level of disability?
7. To what extent (in the respondents' opinion) is the school where they work prepared to work with pupils with disabilities?
8. Does the region in which the surveyed teachers work (Kujawy-Pomerania and Lubuskie Province) constitute a variable that differentiates their views on the functioning of psychological and pedagogical support system for pupils with disabilities?

The study was conducted by means of diagnostic survey method and survey technique (Babbie, 2006). The research tool which was used was a self-constructed survey questionnaire consisting of the respondent's instructions (the purpose of the survey, the way to fill in the questionnaire as well as a guarantee of anonymity; 25 questions – mainly the closed ones and metrics).

In order to verify whether there are statistically significant differences in the opinions of the surveyed teachers regarding the functioning of psychological and pedagogical support system for students with disabilities in both

provinces, one of the most popular nonparametric statistical tests – the Mann-Whitney U test – was used. It makes it possible to compare two independent, non-uniform and large samples (Brzeziński, 2000). The Mann-Whitney U test is commonly used, among others, in socio-demographic, marketing and opinion surveys.

Results – The functioning of psychological and pedagogical support system in Poland on the example of the Lubuskie and Kujawy-Pomerania Provinces in the opinions of teachers

Transformations to favour pupils with special educational needs are made through legislative solutions that sanction inclusive education and appropriate forms of psychological and pedagogical assistance which teachers should be familiarized with. It was important to know the opinions of teachers about whether they are interested in the problem of psychological and pedagogical help system. Less than one third of the surveyed teachers from the two studied regions of Poland claim to be interested in the problem. More than 40% of respondents, regardless of the region, are of the opinion that they are rather interested in the issues of disability and psychological and pedagogical support system for pupils with special educational needs. The higher percentage of teachers from Kujawy-Pomerania (30%) compared with Lubuskie teachers (18%) claim that they are interested in the system of psychological and pedagogical assistance. In Kujawy-Pomerania Province, the smaller percentage of respondents (22%) are of the opinion that they are not interested in this issue compared to the Lubuskie survey (32%).

From a research point of view, it was important to know the opinions of teachers on psychological and pedagogical assistance for pupils with disabilities offered by the schools they work for. Less than half of the teachers from both provinces assess psychological and pedagogical support offered by the school as sufficient (40%). The teachers from Lubuskie Province assess this assistance better than the teachers from Kujawy-Pomerania Province. More than 50% respondents from Lubuskie Province rate psychological and pedagogical assistance in schools as sufficient. Only 20% of Kujawy-Pomerania teachers believe that support in schools is sufficient.

Pupils with special educational needs, in accordance with the current system of psychological and pedagogical assistance in Poland, must be provided with appropriate forms of assistance and rehabilitation classes, which requires the employment of highly-qualified special pedagogy teachers (Table 1). The

study shows that the vast majority of teachers in these two regions of Poland claim that there are speech therapists as well as pedagogues employed in their schools. More than 2/3 teachers from Lubuskie and Kujawy-Pomerania report the presence of oligophrenic teachers¹ in schools. More than 50% of teachers from Kujawy-Pomerania Province claim that their schools employ psychologists and typhlo-specialists. The Lubuskie Region, in terms of employment of typhlo-specialists² and surdo-specialists³ as well as psychologists, falls worse in comparison with Kujawy-Pomerania. Only 9% of Lubuskie province teachers claim that there are typhlo-specialists employed in schools and 8% say that the school employs a surdo-specialist. The schools in Lubuskie Province employ almost 50% fewer psychologists in comparison with the Kujawy-Pomerania region.

Table 1. Teachers' opinions on the employment of special pedagogy teachers in schools

Region	Employed specialists					
	Speech therapist	Typhlo-specialist	Surdo-specialist	Pedagogue	Psychologist	Oligophrenic specialist
Lubuskie Province	60 92%	6 9%	5 8%	63 96%	21 32%	41 64%
Kujawy-Pomerania Province	62 98%	35 55%	18 28%	61 96%	35 55%	39 61%

Source: own compilation.

According to the currently binding provisions of educational law as well as inclusion tendencies, pupils with disabilities have the right to fulfill their compulsory school attendance in a mainstreams school. The study shows that more than half of respondents from the two provinces of Poland believe that pupils with disabilities should study in a mainstream school. Almost one fifth of respondents have no opinion on this issue. The Kujawy-Pomerania Province teachers are more inclined to include disabled pupils in state schools than those from Lubuskie Province. Nearly 70% of teachers from Kujawy-Pomerania believe that pupils with disabilities should study in a mainstream state school. In the Lubuskie region this opinion is shared by 50% of teachers.

¹ Oligophrenic specialist – a specialist who professionally deals with intellectually disabled individuals.

² Typhlo-specialist – a specialist who deals sight-disabled individuals.

³ Surdo-specialist – a specialist who deals with individuals with hearing impairment.

The teachers in the study were expected to assess whether their colleagues were able to meet individual needs of pupils disabilities. The teachers from both provinces similarly evaluated the skills of their colleagues in this regard. More than one third of the respondents in both provinces believe that teachers working in schools are quite able to meet educational needs of their pupils. Only 8% of respondents from Kujawy-Pomerania Province and 9% from Lubuskie Province think that teachers cannot meet individual educational needs of their pupils.

We were also interested in self-assessment of teachers in terms of their ability to adjust educational requirements to individual educational needs of pupils with disabilities at school. A slightly higher percentage of Kujawy-Pomerania Province teachers (1/3), compared with Lubuskie Province teachers (1/4), claim that they can adjust educational requirements to individual needs of pupils, regardless of their disability. On the other hand, a higher proportion of teachers in Lubuskie Province (63%), compared to teachers in Kujawy-Pomerania Province (46%), positively assess their ability to adjust requirements to individual needs of pupils with different disabilities.

More than half of respondents believe that school is prepared to work with pupils with disabilities (17% – very good and 38% – good). The teachers from Kujawy-Pomerania Province better evaluated the preparation of schools to work with pupils with disabilities: 1/3 of the respondents rated the school as very good and 1/3 as good. In the Lubuskie Province the highest percentage of respondents (42.8%) claim that school is prepared to work with a disabled pupils at a good level, and a similar percentage (41.3%) assess the school's preparation as sufficient.

Based on the Mann-Whitney U Test, there were statistically significant differences in the teachers' opinions, at $p < 0.05$ level, concerning their assessment of psychological and pedagogical assistance in schools, employment of typhlo-specialists, surdo-specialists, psychologists as well as school preparation for work with pupils with disabilities (Table 2). In Lubuskie Province schools, there are significantly fewer typhlo-specialists, surdo-specialists and psychologists compared to schools in the Kujawy-Pomerania region.

Table 2. Differences in teachers' opinions from the Kujawy-Pomerania and Lubuskie Provinces on the functioning of psycho-pedagogical aid system⁴

Variable	Mann-Whitney U Test		
	U	Z	p
The interest of teachers in the problems of disability and the system of psychological and pedagogical help	1690.000	-1.70152	n.i.
Assessment of psychological and pedagogical help offered in schools	1165.000	4.20376	p<.05
Employment of a speech therapist in school	1922.500	-0.59339	n.i.
Employment of a typhlo-specialist in school	1099.000	-4.51832	p<.05
Employment of a surdo-specialist in school	1620.000	-2.03515	p<.05
Employment of a pedagogue in school	2045.500	0.00715	n.i.
Employment of a psychologist in school	1571.500	-2.26631	p<.05
Employment of an oligophrenic specialist in school	1972.500	0.20735	n.i.
Assessment of the degree of meeting individual need of pupils with disabilities by other teachers	2004.000	0.20494	n.i.
Self-assessments of respondents' ability to adjust educational requirements to individual educational needs of pupils with disabilities in school	1963.000	0.40036	n.i.
Assessment of school preparation for work with pupils with disabilities	1359.500	-3.04706	p<.05

Source: own compilation.

Discussion

The results of the study enable us to draw some conclusions concerning the functioning of psychological and pedagogical aid system for pupils with disabilities in Poland, in the Lubuskie and Kujawy-Pomerania Provinces. These considerations aim to capture barriers in the process of education of children with special educational needs, especially those with disabilities, as Tony Booth and Mel Ainscow (2002) indicate. The study revealed a number of sensitive areas in the implementation of education policy for pupils with special educational needs, particularly with disabilities. There are indications that teachers are not yet prepared to build a new quality mainstream school that would be open to pupils with different special educational needs. A small proportion of

⁴ Teachers' assessments of various aspects of functioning of psycho-pedagogical aid system were assigned with numerical values: a higher note meant worse functioning, a lower note meant better functioning.

the surveyed teachers are interested in a system of psychological and pedagogical assistance for pupils with special educational needs. The opening of schools for pupils with disabilities is linked with the need to provide them with psycho-pedagogical support with the help of special pedagogy specialists. The study shows that some aspects of the functioning of psycho-pedagogical aid system are assessed by the teachers in the two analysed areas of Poland on a comparable level. This concerns the interests of teachers in psycho-pedagogical assistance system, opinions about educating pupils with disabilities in a mainstream school, assessment of meeting individual learning needs by other teachers as well as self-assessment of the ability to adjust requirements to individual needs of pupils. In other aspects of the functioning of psycho-pedagogical support system, there are significant differences between the two analysed regions of Poland. In the Kujawy-Pomerania region, the level of psychological and pedagogical assistance as well as the level of school preparation for work with pupils with disabilities were better assessed by teachers than in the Lubuskie Province. In addition, schools in the Kujawy-Pomerania Province employ more typhlo-specialists, surdo-specialists and psychologists compared to the Lubuskie Province schools. The study shows that the teachers in the Kujawy-Pomerania region better evaluated the functioning of psycho-pedagogical aid system than the respondents in the Lubuskie region. Perhaps it is related to traditions of special education in the Kujawy-Pomerania region. The tradition of special education at Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń is definitely longer than at Zielona Góra University in Zielona Góra. It is also likely that teachers in the Kujawy-Pomerania region have better access to various forms of education in such academic centres as Warsaw, Gdańsk or Bydgoszcz.

The results obtained cannot be extrapolated to other regions of Poland. At most, it may be suspected that differences in the assessment of psycho-pedagogical aid system among various regions will involve employment of specialized staff, which facilitates providing pupils with disabilities with appropriate educational environment. It is interesting why the teachers of Lubuskie region assessed psychological and pedagogical assistance better than teachers of Kujawy-Pomerania region. The study shows that the teachers from Lubuskie region take less interest in the system of psychological and pedagogical assistance than the teachers from Kujawy-Pomerania. It is probable that too little orientation of the Lubuskie region teachers in educational environment fostered overestimation of the actual state of psycho-pedagogical practice.

Conclusion

Educational policy towards pupils with special educational needs in accordance with the ministerial regulations which set the framework of psycho-pedagogical assistance system, should take into account qualifications of teachers and interest them in the idea of social inclusion. There are relevant legal acts in Poland that deal specifically with various issues of inclusive education for children and young people with special educational needs, including those with disabilities (see the Regulation of The Ministry of Education 30 April 2013 on the rules for provision and organization of psychological and pedagogical assistance in state kindergartens, schools and institutions, Journal of Laws 2013, item 532). Unfortunately, the two conditions necessary for the success of inclusive education mentioned above are not fully met.

There is an urgent need to pay particular attention to the process of teacher education in terms of their competence for didactic and educational work with pupils with various developmental and educational needs. Since 2012, all curricula of studies in the field of teaching have included new educational standards with theoretical and methodical knowledge of specific educational activities as well as pedagogical and psychological training, including preparation for work with pupils with special educational needs (Regulation of the Minister of Science and Higher Education of 17 January 2012 on standards of education preparing for the teaching profession, Journal of Laws 2012, item 131). It can therefore be assumed that the students who are currently preparing for a teaching profession will acquire the knowledge, skills and social competences necessary for effective education and upbringing of children and adolescents of varying levels of psychomotor development and educational needs. Unfortunately, these competences were not always provided during the course of study with older generations of teachers who had to be provided with opportunities to acquire additional qualifications to work with pupils with special educational needs in postgraduate studies. These were not only very narrowly specialized postgraduate studies from selected sub-disciplines of special pedagogy (eg. oligophrenic-pedagogy, surdo-pedagogy, typhlo-pedagogy), which prepare graduates to work exclusively with children and young people with one kind of disability but also studies of a wider spectrum of developmental disorders and health problems, e.g. education and rehabilitation of students with special educational needs (i.e. pupils with various disabilities, spectrum of autistic disorders, chronically ill, etc.). However, in order for such a change to be possible, academic centers in the two analyzed regions of Poland should provide teachers with an offer of

training that takes into account the needs of practice, which results from the presented diagnosis. In the process of education, teachers should be familiarized not only with the problems and needs of children and young people with different kinds of special educational needs but also with the procedures of providing them with various forms of psychological and pedagogical assistance. It is also necessary for teachers to acquire practical skills necessary to conduct educational and revalidation activities for pupils with special educational needs.

The study is preliminary and the researchers see the need for further teacher research (their opinions, attitudes, behaviors) in the field of inclusive education. The use of a qualitative research strategy is recommended. The future plans include carrying out a series of quantitative research with the use of new variables (for example: the age of the surveyed teachers, their length of service in the profession, forms of professional development in which teachers participate) concerning the “barriers” in educational inclusion in Polish schools.

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