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Beata Skotnicka

University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland

e-mail: beata.skotnicka@us.edu.pl

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7700-9810>

Sebastian Mrózek

University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland

e-mail: sebastian.mrozek@us.edu.pl

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9490-2640>

The Activities of Local Government Municipal Units in Shaping Inclusive Education in Poland

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Abstract

The mechanisms of financing are key in reducing educational differences. Therefore, the provision of financing for systemic solutions and structures that facilitate the development of inclusive education is one of the key factors influencing the creation of this education model and its practical implementation. Among the organs responsible for organizing and implementing inclusive education in Poland are units of local government, which by implementing the local policy are obliged to take into account solutions that promote inclusion both in broadly understood social and educational activities. The objective of this study is to present research results pertaining to the role of local government units in shaping inclusive education and in promoting the idea of inclusion, as well as the preliminary identification of good practice in this field. The research was conducted using the focus interview method. The focus groups consisted of selected representatives the faculties/departments of education of municipal local government units which were diverse in terms of structure. It can be seen that the activities of local government units are important in terms of creating inclusive education and that they constitute the basis

for the dissemination of good practice. A significant role is also assigned to the documents they create, such as municipal strategies and education financing plans.

Keywords: local government units, inclusive education, mechanisms of financing, municipal strategies.

Introduction

For several years, fulfilling the requirements of social inclusion through the inclusive education model has been one of the main areas of strategic collaboration at the level of ministries of education of EU member states (European Commission, 2010; 2019). The mechanisms of financing are key to reducing differences in education. Therefore, providing finance for systemic solutions and structures that facilitate the development of inclusive education is one of the key factors influencing the creation of this model of education and its practical implementation. The suggested solutions aim to indicate a coherent cross-sectoral strategy for implementing the changes, as well as collecting opinions, remarks and suggestions which serve to raise the quality of education for all learners. The organs responsible for the organization and implementation of education at the local level are the units of local government, which, by implementing the local policy, are obliged to take into account solutions that promote inclusion both in broadly understood social activities and in educational ones. Equally important for the development of good practice in inclusive education are strategic activities associated with designing the local educational policy and financial resources for its implementation. The objective of this study is to present research results pertaining to the role of local government units in shaping inclusive education and in promoting the idea of inclusion. Our analysis of the results comprises statements from the representatives of local government units responsible for designing local plans of educational development. Both the research goal and our standpoint allow us to put forward the hypothesis that the *sine qua non* of designing and successfully implementing inclusive education is the engagement of local government units in designing and coordinating activities in this area at the local level by creating educational strategies, plans to finance them

and cooperation with local schools. These changes should be initiated and promoted by local governments.

Different approaches to inclusive education

The issue of inclusive education has been present in the educational space for several decades, and it is still a challenge for educational policies. The successive changes are aimed at the best possible adaptation of the teaching process to the needs of all learners. Owing to the limited framework of this article, detailed considerations pertaining to the theoretical foundations of inclusive education are not undertaken here. These considerations have been extensively explored in many publications on special education (Baylis, 2002; Chrzanowska, 2009; 2019; Lechta, 2010; Gajdzica, 2011).

The concept of inclusive education is based on the notion of social inclusion, which is generally defined as the process of including individuals, groups or social categories (e.g. people with disabilities) into the broader social functioning. This phenomenon is opposite to exclusion (social marginalization). If we apply a broad understanding of this concept in social sciences, it refers to all people, as every person – regardless of their personal characteristics – has the right to participate in social life equally to others. The core of such an assumption is both the recognition of diversity as a norm and the acceptance of existing differences (Chrzanowska, 2019, p. 31). Social inclusion is defined as the process through which individuals at risk of exclusion gain the opportunities and resources necessary to fully participate in social, cultural and economic life and to maintain a standard of living at a level considered acceptable in a particular society. An important aspect of inclusive activities is ensuring greater participation of individuals at risk of exclusion in decision-making processes that have a direct impact on their lives and on their access to fundamental rights (Council of the European Union, 2004). Therefore, social inclusion is an expression of the currently recommended directions of democratic transformations. The interest in this issue in various disciplines allows for a deepening of reflection in the areas of diagnosis of social problems and needs in regard both to the current state and to the

predicted future directions of social changes. The term educational inclusion is developed from social inclusion and directly serves its development. There are various meanings of inclusive education in the academic literature. They can be considered in the philosophical, cultural and pedagogical dimensions, as well as in the organizational-administrative or legal aspects. Among the reasons for applying the assumptions of inclusion in social and educational practice, Agnieszka Naumiuk (2018) indicates three leading areas. Firstly, there is a need to analyse the current challenges and opportunities for social change in democratic societies. The second area refers to participation in outlining the directions of the future of education in the context of social changes in regard to establishing new local, national and international principles of solidarity, social justice, respecting the rights of individuals and social groups, focusing on dialogue and developing common solutions (Surzykiewicz, 2016). The third area is anticipating possible negative effects of socio-political changes, the need to create a security system and reorganizing the socio-educational framework of education (Grotkowska-Leder, 2005). Another important element in the discussion on inclusive education is the local government environment, which is the subject of this publication.

As Grzegorz Szumski emphasizes, “inclusive education is not a homogeneous theoretical and practical concept, but all the ways of understanding it complement one another” (Szumski, 2019, p. 18). In special education, the notion is used both in the descriptive sense (which refers to the real educational conditions) and the prescriptive one (in which inclusive education is treated as a reform of the educational system aimed at providing high-quality education for all) (Szumski, 2019). In its broad meaning, inclusive education refers to all the resources and processes aimed at forming the whole of human abilities, taking into account a person’s individual needs and developmental capabilities that exist in conditions free from stigmatization and categorization. The essence of this process is acting within the common current in education. Another important task is the development of all learners and increasing their social participation – especially those in an unfavourable developmental situation – through identifying and eliminating the barriers which hinder or block the processes of constructing high-quality education

for all (Gajdzica et al., 2021). Thus, education is the space in which the interests of state structures and the expectations of individuals are subject to constant change and are unceasingly negotiated. These changes are aimed at the best possible adjustment of the educational system to the needs of all its participants (Skotnicka, 2020).

The postulate of developing a school which is accessible to all learners assumes the broadening of the meaning of educational goals, which comprise – apart from educational achievements – also the development of communal values and creating favourable social attitudes in collaboration with all the agents in the local environment in order to build a culture of high-quality inclusive education for all (Forlin, 2010). Financing should increase the potentialities of the system, which will provide all learners with access to schools located the closest from their place of residence and will provide them with equal chances of success and with inclusion into a broader community. Financing is aimed at limiting negative trends which might enhance segregation. It is essential to implement monitoring mechanisms concerning the efficient use of resources. Moreover, it is important to clearly formulate the agreed rules of financing and cross-sectional or institutional collaboration in the field of education. The efficiency and profitability of financing mechanisms depend on gaining the resources and some related factors, treated as the key driving forces. The main premise in fulfilling this goal is the need to finance strategies which lead to educational inclusion, not exclusion (Edukacja dla wszystkich..., 2020).

The role of local government units in creating inclusive education

Local government can be defined “as an organ of public administration in a particular territory, as well as a local community of corporation character to which one belongs by law” (Adamowicz & Skarżyńska, 2017, p. 321). Through legal regulations, the local government is one of the fundamental political-legal institutions of a modern state. As a result of the reform of territorial administration in 1998 (which came into force in 1999), the state

delegated the responsibility to manage schools and educational institutions to local authorities. Local government units, functioning on various levels of the territorial organization of the state, fulfil different educational tasks. The most important tasks directly concerning citizens are fulfilled by municipal governments. Educational tasks can be distinguished as being among their public tasks, as well as social and cultural tasks which are performed as inner tasks. One of the main public tasks performed by local governments is the implementation of educational tasks. This takes place with the engagement of all local government levels, and the whole range of competences of the local government in performing public tasks largely depends on the way and scope of their specification by the legislator that has strengthened these tasks with the consecutive reforms (Kurzyńska-Chmiel, 2013, p. 207). Financing mechanisms should promote collaboration at all levels among the stakeholders in the fields of education, health and social aid to prevent the rise of barriers (Wsparcie podnoszenia jakości..., 2019). However, as Krakąła and Lackowski (2012, p. 3) indicate, local governments have no actual independence in managing education, which results in the situation that territorial authorities have obligations, but many important competences to implement them successfully remain within the remit of state administration. These are often competences related to conducting the current educational policy (Krakąła & Lackowski, 2012, p. 20). Inclusive education, which means school for all, assumes that modern school systems require a wide-ranging transformation in the sphere of values pertaining to the reconstruction of culture, politics and educational practice. Such a transformation will result in educational institutions successfully responding to the diversity of learners in local communities, can build commonality and provide participation and achievement for all learners at risk of exclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2002).

Strategic planning

Building a successful educational policy should be preceded by elaborating a strategy or developmental plan for local education. Constructing a strategic plan is a process involving establishing priorities and long-term goals and

designing particular activities, among other things (Pintal & Tomaszewicz, 2017). The structure of this document should comprise the following elements: a diagnosis; the specification of priorities; the formulation of (strategic and operational) goals; designing the activities/tasks; the choice/specification of indicators; the system of implementation: financing; work schedule; and monitoring and evaluation (Pintal et al., 2018, p. 220).

The developmental strategies of a municipality/town/county or the plans of educational development (which might be a part of these strategies or separate documents referred to as educational strategies) should take into account the recommendations resulting from national strategic documents of Poland on the one hand, and on the other hand they should be based on a reliable diagnosis, including a diagnosis of the state of local education which involves the examination of social needs in a particular environment. In order to increase the effectiveness of the activities performed, local authorities need to include the local community in making joint decisions on the directions of local development as well as education. From the standpoint of the development of inclusive education, the strategic approach is important as it contributes to elaborating mechanisms which serve long-term activities for meeting the diverse educational needs of all learners. Yet, as studies conducted by a research team from the University of Warsaw show, just over 20% of local government units declare they have an educational strategy (Sobotka, 2012). According to Gawroński (2010), Swianiewicz (2010) and Matczak (2012), the reasons for such a weakness in the strategic shaping of local educational policies can be attributed to local officials' ambivalent attitude to strategic planning in the educational sector and to the effectiveness of strategy documents, as well as to strategies being viewed as tools to acquire and justify the distribution of EU resources, rather than as programme documents. Regardless of the elaboration of educational strategies, the aims of local educational policies are included in the developmental strategies of municipalities, which – according to various studies – are in force in about 71% of local government units (Piróg et al., 2013; Trutkowski & Kurniewicz, 2015).

The creation of a strategy by local authorities should guarantee not only the ideals in the field of educational development, but also their implemen-

tation. This results in securing financial resources which are indispensable to achieve the goals and tasks undertaken. Cezary Trutkowski (2015, p. 44) states that “in many municipalities, especially smaller ones, the expenditure on education constitutes over a half of current budget expenses”. The author also draws attention to the constantly growing dissonance between local educational needs and the possibilities of their fulfilment being financed by local governments.

This is confirmed by the outcomes of studies conducted by The Foundation in Support of Local Democracy (Trutkowski & Kurniewicz, 2015). The data analysis showed representativeness of the data on the scale of state units at the municipal level. Theoretically, the reference point in managing education should be, firstly, to design tasks in relation to local goals or social conditions and, secondly, to design a budget for their implementation. According to Trutkowski (2015), the reality is different because the activities within education are undertaken in compliance with financial possibilities and often without an in-depth analysis of educational needs. Research conducted by Trutkowski and Kurniewicz (2015) indicates that the key objectives in the educational sector are defined by local “actors” in regard to three main issues: optimizing the accessibility of educational institutions to comply with current demographic trends; increasing the quality of education, mostly understood as raising the indicators of learning outcomes; modernizing and updating the educational base by improving school infrastructure and equipping schools with didactic resources, as well as by adjusting educational provision to the needs of the local labour market (Trutkowski, 2014). Moreover, the data collected in the studies conducted by The Institute of Educational Research and by The Foundation for Developing Local Democracy indicate the lack of a well-coordinated educational policy at the local level and ineffective administration at all levels regarding the design and implementation of educational policies, which are formulated top-down by The Ministry of Education and Science and boards of education (Trutkowski, 2014). Aneta Sobotka (2012, p. 40) claims that “in Polish education, there are more strategies (understood as documents) than strategic planning (understood as methodically performing the activities leading to achieving the indicated goal)”.

Methodological assumptions of the research

The research aimed at presenting the activities of local government units in shaping inclusive education in Poland and at the preliminary recognition of good practice in this field. The research object consisted of the opinions of local government representatives pertaining to creating municipal strategies and the mechanisms of financing them, with the aim of meeting the needs of all learners. The main research problem was included in the question: How do local government units support the shaping of inclusive education? The main problem was supplemented in a significant way by the following questions: What activities do local government units undertake for the development of inclusive education? What is the role of municipal strategies in supporting inclusive education in the opinions of local government representatives? In order to find answers to these research questions, qualitative studies were conducted using focus interviews. Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, the focus interviews were conducted online at the beginning of November 2020. The discussion was carried out in two groups, each comprising 10 people. The focus groups consisted of representatives of structurally diverse municipal units of local government, the faculties/departments of education (focus group 1: Barcin, Czerwionka-Leszczyny, Jaworze, Jastrzębie-Zdrój, Katowice, Łódź, Opole, Tarnowo-Podgórne, Skarżysko-Kamienna, Warsaw; focus group 2: Bydgoszcz, Doruchów, Gogolin, Gołdap, Gościmiec, Jastarnia, Legnica, Mikołów, Ostróda, Gorzów-Śląski). The representatives were recommended at an earlier stage of the research by school head-teachers. The data collected were transcribed and served as the basis for a multidimensional qualitative analysis. The analysis was carried out in compliance with the assumptions of Creswell's six stages of analysis (2013, pp. 201-205). The stages involve: 1. Organization and preparation of the data; 2. Overview of all the data; 3. Starting a detailed analysis from the coding process; 4. Using the coding process to come up with a description of the people, setting or categories/themes for analysis; 5. Specifying the manner in which themes and descriptions will be presented and the thematic scopes; 6. Interpretation of the data. The data obtained during the research form the basis for generating

further categories concerning the activities of local government units in creating inclusive education at the local level.

Qualitative analysis of focus interviews

The focus interviews began with a discussion of the issue of financing school education and inclusive education in Poland. The interviewees emphasized insufficient financial resources for covering the costs of the solutions proposed. It was recognized that “especially psychological-pedagogical support and the resources for it should be granted in accordance with particular principles” (f1). In Poland, only children with a certified need for special education issued by a public psychological-pedagogical counselling centre are provided with more resources within the educational subsidy. There is no such solution in the case of learners for whom only an opinion has been expressed, e.g. on the need for psychological-pedagogical support. The local government representatives of municipal units declared that, in order to ensure appropriate psychological-pedagogical support for learners, they allocate some resources from municipal budgets to organize such support, even though they were originally allocated to other areas of municipal development. They indicated: “As the organs that maintain and run schools, we are unable to catch up with the growing number of children with special educational needs who want to be educated in mainstream schools, although we do our best in this field – sometimes at the cost of other social areas” (f1). In particular, for municipalities with smaller budgets, this is an debatable solution which requires systemic legislative changes. The situation is exacerbated by parents who expect schools to adapt to their child’s needs as regards technical aspects – equipping the school with professional didactic aids – and the employment of well-qualified teaching staff. As the respondents stated, “all this generates considerable costs, which we are not always able to cover from the educational subsidy” (f2).

However, the local government representatives are aware of the potential of inclusive education. They treat it as a supplement to the activities conducted by specialist institutions. The respondents unanimously indicated that “for

learners with profound disabilities, special schools are the most complex and effective form of education” (f1).

The next topic discussed in the focus interviews with local government representatives concerned the strategic approach and locating content pertaining to inclusive education in Polish municipal strategies. The respondents drew attention to the optional character of the developmental strategy for municipalities and the developmental goals included in it, which should be attained in a particular time period – usually several years. In the participants’ opinion, the developmental strategy is “a document of a very general nature, as it pertains to all the fields of municipal functioning” (f2). Its contents are brief and only signal particular developmental tendencies. According to the participants, “the basic task of a developmental strategy is a precise specification of the direction at which the municipality will aim in the next few years” (f2). Regarding the content related to inclusive education, the local government representatives shared the opinion that only general highlighting of this content was justified. This strategy correlates with other strategies and planning documents which specify particular areas – e.g. the strategy for educational development, the municipal plan of activities for people with disabilities, the strategy to resolve social issues, as well as many state documents.

The need for more precise specification of the content related to inclusive education was signalled by the interviewees in the context of the strategy for educational development. This results from the multitude of special educational needs among learners. Specifying such provisions indicates transparency of the educational activities undertaken. As the participants stressed, “these are useful contents for parents of children with diverse educational needs, because they give an overview of the efforts undertaken in the municipality” (f2). What is mostly meant here is the elimination of barriers in schools, equipping schools with specialist equipment for working with learners with special educational needs, and substantial support for teachers. The interviewees signalled the need to specify the content not only pertaining to learners with disabilities, but also to gifted learners. They agreed that “particularly gifted learners are an important subject of educational development and their specific talents should be appropriately used and supported” (f2).

Municipalities make use of two ways to create strategies. The first consists of commissioning the elaboration of a strategy to an external agent, who deals with the formal aspects of the document but does this “in consensus with the representatives of local government and other subjects functioning in the territory of the municipality” (f1). For the second way, the whole strategy is prepared by municipal organs. Its elaboration takes place by “appointing a special team, which by dividing into and working in smaller groups, deals with particular strategic fields” (f1).

What the interviewees considered good practice in elaborating a strategy was the socialization of the process of formulating it, which involves residents, school staff, and representatives of social agents, firms and establishments. It was declared that “Recognizing diverse expectations is a recipe for elaborating a strategy that will fulfil the goals assumed in it in a real way” (f2).

The staff of educational departments of local governments stated that in many situations they had to verify the content included in strategies of educational development. This refers to “eliminating or limiting unrealistic ideas, e.g. of head-teachers, which are currently not feasible due to many determinants”. However, this activity contributes to the greater authenticity of publicly submitted strategies.

The third issue discussed in the focus interviews was the promotion of inclusive education at the municipal level. The representatives of local government units unanimously agreed that “inclusive education determines successful social inclusion” (f2). Therefore, it is necessary to undertake activities that address both learners with special educational needs and the local community as a whole.

What the interviewees also considered good practice was the organization of training concerning inclusive education in which various agents jointly take part: representatives of municipal authorities, school staff and representatives of under-privileged groups. This enhances the development of a “united front” in activities promoting inclusive education. The expert invited to the training sessions discusses contemporary solutions in the field of inclusion, which is followed by attempts at joint implementation into the daily functioning of the municipality. The representatives of educational departments also signalled

that they participated with teaching staff in talks with parents about the support offered to children with special educational needs. Parents of children without disabilities are also encouraged to take part in these meetings, because it was emphasized that “this is a space which enhances the development of attitudes based on tolerance and acceptance and which should not raise fear” (f1). In the interviewees’ opinion, such a practice often serves as a stimulus for joint organization of events in the future.

It was emphasized that, with the dissemination of the idea of inclusive education throughout Poland, schools have become institutions that are more open. This is manifested in positive attitudes towards individuals with special needs, as well as in more intensive activity and in undertaking collaboration with the local environment. As a result, there is “a systematically growing number of workshop activities organized in the area” (f2). Most frequently, these are conducted using methods that enrich the didactic process such as visual arts, music, new technologies, sport, meetings with interesting people, and trips. The organization of such undertakings involves the engagement of the whole school environment and quite often of representatives of municipal authorities.

The interviewees shared the opinion that another good practice in developing inclusive education is the maintenance of regular contact with the staff of psychological-pedagogical counselling centres. These centres are responsible for the certification system in Poland. Acting in a “triad” consisting of the representatives of these centres, schools and local government units enables a multifaceted adjustment of the school environment to the needs of diversified groups of learners. Furthermore, local governments, being familiar with the latest data (shared by psychological-pedagogical counselling centres) pertaining to certification, are able to plan initiatives and forms of support in a long-term perspective. This also refers to employing specialists needed at a particular moment.

Priority was assigned by the local government representatives to regular teacher training. However, they sensibly admitted that “one cannot be a specialist in everything” (f2) and that teachers might feel burnt out owing to high expectations from their profession and the many duties with which they struggle. The representatives of some municipalities signalled that they

make efforts to provide teachers with regular supervision. It was also stated that schools can apply for funding from EU resources. The funding may be spent on technical adjustments to the environment, on modernization of the facilities so that they adequately meet the needs of people with disabilities, as well as on broadening the didactic offer. The interviewees expressed their willingness to help in preparing projects which might bring a school or a municipality additional funding. They stressed that: “This is for our common

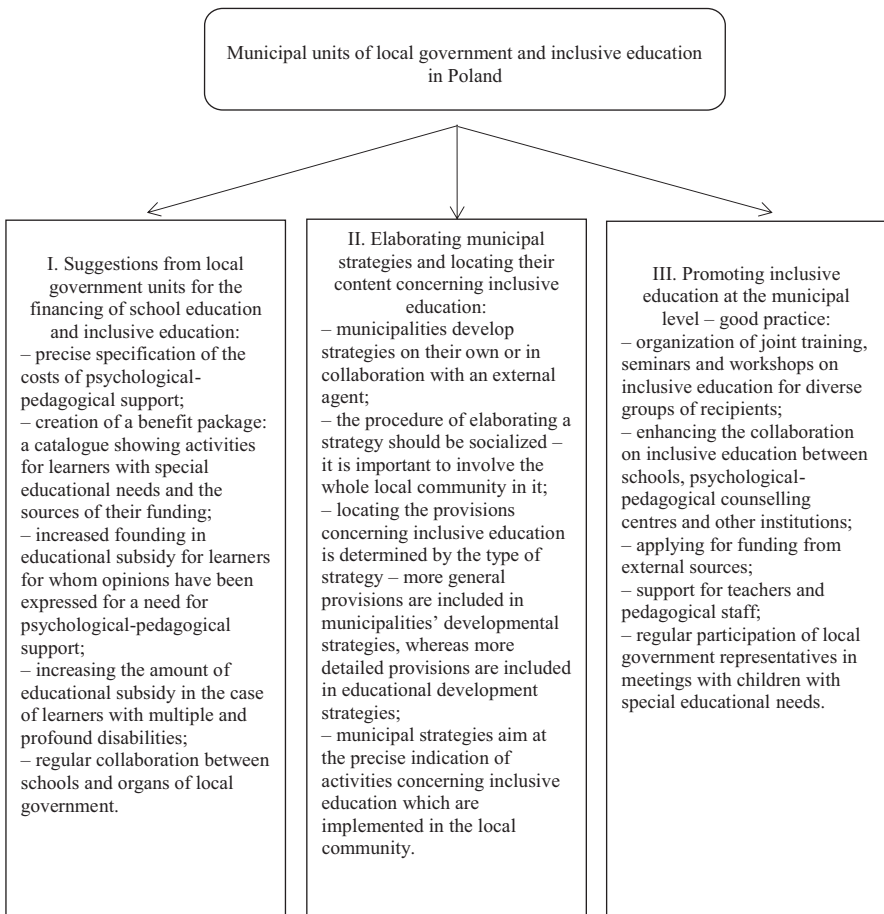


Figure 1. Municipal units of local government and inclusive education in Poland

Source: Authors’ research.

good, therefore we encourage schools to write projects and we serve them with our support and experience” (f2).

A Figure presents an overview of the main conclusions expressed in the particular topics discussed at the focus interviews with the representatives of local government units.

Recapitulation

The analysis shows that the representatives of local government units are agents engaged in promoting inclusive education in Poland. Their role can be described as initiating, coordinating and supplementing certain activities in the field of inclusive education. In fact, inclusive education is not viewed as the only remedy for improving the educational and social situation of learners with diverse needs. It is considered to be a supplement to the special and integrated education which functions in Poland. In the interviewees' opinion, educational inclusion is an idea worth disseminating, and it might contribute to raising the quality of life for individuals from groups at risk of social exclusion. However, a need to make systemic corrections was recognized, especially in the field of finance. Educational inclusion is enhanced by implementing a local social policy that raises the municipal community's awareness of the requirements of people with disabilities or with special needs, by implementing valuable solutions in the local environment and by trust-based collaboration with institutions functioning in the municipality.

What should also be indicated is the significance of municipal strategies in creating the assumptions around inclusive education, in particular because they are documents which are accessible to the general public and are elaborated in compliance with the requirements of the local community. The effectiveness of the expected strategic impact is increased by having a socialized procedure to elaborate strategies and implement them in the local environment. All attempts to simulate activities are unethical and result in the idea of educational inclusion becoming an illusory and distorted creation in the municipal territories, which should be prevented at all costs.

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