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The Normative Definitions of Inclusive Education Developed by Teachers from Numerous Schools and of Varied Professional Experience

Abstract

The purpose of the research as presented by us in this article, was to determine the aims with which teachers from various types of schools and of varied professional experience develop normative definitions of inclusive education.

We paved the way to formulate these aims in the research tool with the analysis of literature on the subject, demonstrating three main trends in defining inclusive education. One hundred and eighty-eight teachers were surveyed, providing answers to the following research questions: 1/ domination of aims in definitions being developed and 2/ their correlations with professional experience and place of employment. We subjected them to a quantitative and correlational analysis. As a result, we determined that the aims related to meeting the needs of students with developmental disorders and those at risk of educational exclusion amongst the teacher definitions of inclusive education are dominant. In fact, the aims of the "every school for every student" idea of optimal inclusion are virtually missing. We determined that

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in the subject group, the type of school, teacher employment as well as their professional experience is related to the definition being developed.

Key words: inclusion, inclusive education, aims, definitions, teachers, conditions.

Introduction

The main goal of Poland's state education policy in the 2014/2015 school year was to create inclusive education for students with disabilities. The state authorities began promoting the idea of inclusion as a part of its core function and resolved to enact legislation in response to student needs. Whilst local governments were tasked with developing appropriate financial policies underpinning the idea of inclusion, school principals were given autonomy in developing human resources policies, whereas the decision on school selection as a place of education for children with disabilities was left – in line with Constitution – to the parents. Along with the general division of tasks, a range of materials was developed to support the process of transformation of staff mindset towards education, aiming to break down the anticipated barriers and formulating the transformation of the school's environment as a process. One of the key and widely recommended publications in this area is the "Guide to inclusive education: developing learning and participation in schools" (Booth, Ainscow, 2011), the Polish adaptation of *Index for Inclusion: developing learning and participation in schools* (Booth, Ainscow, 2002), in which social inclusion and inclusive education is described as a "life-long process of learning and participation for all students in education, (...) limiting activities that may lead to exclusion. It refers to all temporary or permanent mechanisms that stand in the way of full participation. They arise from difficulties in forming relationships with others or learning difficulties, and from feelings of being undervalued. Inclusion is the elimination of barriers of access to education and creating conditions that enable all students to be included in the mainstream. Inclusion begins with the recognition that each student is unique" (as above: pp. 2–3).

The authors, inspired by the research conducted among special school teachers by Iwona Chrzanowska (2016), describing the various patterns of how opinion on inclusive education is created, have attempted to ascertain how teachers define inclusive education through the prism of its aims, also investigating how the thus created definition relates to other factors. The authors were additionally motivated to undertake this research following many years of experience in providing professional development training in inclusive education to

teachers, as teacher effectiveness (permanently controlled in evaluation) seems to be related to their perception of the aims of inclusion.

Trends in defining inclusive education

The key impetus for creating an environment and activities for inclusive education was the announcement made at the World Conference on Special Education in Salamanca in 1994 on directions for change in international education policy, to be used to promote inclusive approaches, with education recognised as a fundamental human right.

At the conference, inclusive education was defined as "the process of strengthening the capacity of the education system to accommodate all learners and people, thus enabling schools to service all children, especially those with special educational needs" (UNESCO, 2009, p. 8). In the last ten years, this definition has been transformed, distinguishing between two current trends – descriptive and normative, the latter dominating in reports on the implementation of ideas, and the second accompanied by studies determining the requirements of inclusive education.

Several approaches to grasping the idea of inclusion (Ainscow et al., 2006) exist in the area of informative definitions, three of which seem, in light of applicable laws on education, most likely to define the aims of inclusive education in Poland.

Inclusion as an expression of **concern for students with disabilities and others classified as having "special educational needs"** (SEN), affirming the right of students with special developmental needs (challenging behaviours and developmental disorders) to education in the public local school sector (Uditsky, 1993, p. 88). There is a high risk that this approach ignores the educational needs of students who might not be classified in the formal education and psychological (and medical) support system as disabled and/or as having SEN. The significant differences in how various countries classify disability and SEN are a cause for concern. In some, student labeling is unacceptable but the observed or anticipated efficiency of universal education in relation to the child's individual needs is taken into account. This results in the "need for special educational services" approach (such as in the United Kingdom). Other countries make "objective reasons" (inherent in the individual) a key criterion for access to special education (Peters, 2003). They create a multitude of disability categories (e.g. in Denmark there are two, in the USA there are ten, whilst in Poland there are currently 12 categories). Keith Topping and Sheelagh Maloney (2005)

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emphasise that focusing on isolated disability (or special educational needs of students) can lead to erroneous assumptions in the development of global education policy.

1. Inclusion as an educational responsibility applied to **all groups with the risk of exclusion** seems to be a trend of social anti-discrimination activities. Inclusion serves as a guard against the escalation of risk factors or the pressure of exclusion factors (Mittler, 2000; Campbell, 2002). Inclusive education applies to everyone who is at risk of marginalisation or exclusion, irrespective of reasons (Ainscow et al., 2006, Clark et al., 1995; Ballard, 1995). Liz Gerschel (2003) lists gender, race, ethnic background, religion, language, sexuality, care status, socio-economic status, disability or skill set as some of them. Whilst this approach is unquestionably broader, there is lack of clarity as to the notion of "exclusion factors". They may vary in range (we are not aware if proponents of this approach include students displaying aggressive behaviour or children with social anxiety, and to what extent they regard inclusive education as a response to disciplinary exclusion, corresponding to the generalised aims of social rehabilitation and re-integration, etc.). Furthermore, such inclusion should be preceded by a thorough investigation of the nature and origins of exclusion processes in social structures (Ainscow et al., 2006, p. 20), if only to define these "inclusive factors". When discussing the definition of inclusive education from this perspective, Roger Slee and Julie Allan (2001) emphasize that 1 / inclusive education is a social movement against educational exclusion, in which all students are considered, not only those with special educational needs, 2 / the educational policy of inclusion is not a mild progression of past and present experiences, and the removal of existing barriers would require considerable major rebuilding of the culture of universal education. They also believe that the application of inclusive education to all students would create opposition to the dominance of special education teachers in research, and in views on the ideas and management of the inclusion process as those with (as the only ones: authors) knowledge of the special needs of children. The Slee and Allan opinions correspond with the views of Tony Knight (2000) who claims that inclusive education is not an end in itself, but a necessary condition for democratic education and Art Pearl (Knight, Pearl, 2000) who consistently argue that it is a process in fostering equality, social integration and creating an optimal environment

for all. This voice in generates another approach to defining inclusive education.

2. Inclusive education as **education for all**, accurately described in the *Guidelines for Inclusion* (UNESCO, 2005) as **development of a school for all**, refers to **respect for diversity**, values the relationship between the school and the local environment (Hall, 1996; Rouse, Florian, 1996; Thomas, 1997) and highlights the approach to education typical of value-based societies (Ainscow et al., 2006, pp. 14–15), including democratic societies, which is the ultimate idea of inclusive education. It should be noted whilst initially assessing the existence of each of the definition trends in the Polish education system that although the Guide to Inclusive Education (...) (Booth, Ainscow, 2011) in principle identifies all the essential features of the educational inclusion process, documents created and disseminated by the Polish government later on (as well as acts of law) clearly limited the aims of inclusive education, directing creators' attention towards the disabled and SEN student group only. The report by the Ministry of National Education, Education of Students With Disabilities (2014) and a set of publications written by the Centre for Education Development is worth a mention here, with the words *the disabled and the SEN student* appearing in most of the titles. Whilst Poland's advancements in implementing global trends of inclusive education seems to justify focusing on special educational needs and disabilities, we should also assume that this was a source of confusion in how the ideological aims of inclusions are understood by individual teachers, weakening its position as a tool for development of democracy in the country. Many teachers indicate informally that they don't actually "get this inclusion". Some say that this is a new name for "integration", some that they are fully implementing it, although they find it difficult to define, whilst others do not see the point in abandoning segregation of students as far as access to specific facilities is provided. Considering this context and the issue that each of the trends of defining inclusive education basically overlooks defining the role of the entities involved in education, in the opinion of the authors we must look at the leading implementers of the inclusion ideology.

Teacher's competences in the inclusive education process

Mel Ainscow (1999, p. 218) suggests that inclusive education is an unachievable compromise in **the struggle** between the process (assumptions of inclusion) and the practice of education that raises barriers to the participation of some students in universal education. Education practices are created by governments, educational authorities and, above all, teachers. The element of struggle, about which Ainscow writes, occurs – in the subjective opinion of the authors – between the creators, but also within each of these groups. There are disputes and conflict between direct recipients of inclusive education and representatives of school and leading authorities.

Since 2013, as a result of the debate organised by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, decision makers, scientists, practitioners and people with disabilities, it has been highlighted that the success of inclusive education depends, amongst others, on the level of qualifications of specialists, including the preparation of teachers for inclusion. This requires changes in all areas of vocational education – in training programs, daily practice and recruitment (European Agency, 2014, p. 6–7). It is said that the concept of highly qualified specialists also depends on **values followed by teachers**, their **competence** (...), and **attitudes** (...)" (as above, p. 17).

A comprehensive approach to assessing the effectiveness of work undertaken by teachers in inclusive education has been the subject of many international studies. Among the factors contributing to teacher competence there are self-reflection and experience gained in educational practice (Isosomppi, Leivo, 2015, p. 693), knowledge of student educational needs, conceptual thinking, the ability to recognise the personal and social significance of activities for children with special needs and the desire to be accountable for the quality of the outcomes (Movkebaieva et al., 2013, pp. 551–554). General attitudes towards social inclusion and inclusive practice are also listed (Lambe, 2007, p. 62). Len Barton and Felicity Armstrong (2007, pp. 5–17) highlight that the success or failure of an educational inclusion policy depends on the way in which teachers understand or interpret this concept. There are no studies available where this understanding is confirmed, however.

Methodological basis of own research

The elements of the concept of own research, as presented below, just like their results, are a part of a broad research project in which the authors search for

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information on the state of factors shaping the effectiveness of inclusive educa-tion in Poland and Europe in four simplified categories: definitions and aims, recipients, implementation contexts and implementers. The aim of the part of the study presented in the article was to determine which of the objectives at-tributed to inclusive education in documents shaping the global, international inclusion policy create a normative definition in the opinion of Polish teachers. The following research questions were aligned to the aim:

1. Which of the aims (for the purpose of simplification referred to as "definition components" herein) for inclusive education in documents shaping the global, in-ternational inclusion policy dominate in the constructed normative definitions to-gether and separately in each of the separate groups of teachers in the study?
2. How does the experience and place of employment of teachers (demonstrating their educational experience) relate to a constructed definition?

In the selection of the sample, arbitrary selection was used. The criterion was employment of various types of teachers at the school, with a minimum of one year of experience.

An indirect survey was used in the study, using a questionnaire in two iden-tical versions – a paper and on online form. The complete tool consists of eight parts. In this study, we present the results contained in the first part, comprising data on the type of teacher employment facility and their professional experi-ence, and a set of statements defining the aims of inclusive education (with complete freedom of choice between the six components, as well as a place for own goal setting, which was not used by any of the respondents). The aims of inclusive education included in the statements were formulated and assigned to the defining trends, as per Table 1.

Table 1. Trends defining inclusive education vs the definition components used in the research

Trends defining inclusive education	Symbol: Statements – components of definitions
Inclusive education as an expression of concern for disabled students and SEN	C1: adaptation of the school process to the needs of students with various educational problems (special, unique, atypical, etc.) and allowing these students to study at their place of residence
Inclusive education as educational responsibility related to all groups with the risk of exclusion	C2: increasing access to education, promoting full participation in the education system of all students at risk of exclusion through loss of access to educational experiences, as well as promoting the capacity to realise their potential

Table 1.

Trends defining inclusive education	Symbol: Statements – components of definitions
Inclusive education as education for everyone	C3: reducing barriers to the process of education for all students, not just those with disabilities or students with ‚special educational needs'
	C4: promoting positive attitudes amongst a group of people engaged in the process of education (educational authorities, teachers, parents, students)
	C5: highlighting the role of the school in building local communities, in the building of values and raising educational achievements
	C6: development of democracy in the country, creating equality, social integration and creating an optimal environment for everyone.

Source: Authors' research

Questionnaires fully completed by 188 teachers were used to analyse the data from surveys conducted from March 2017 to January 2018, including nearly 60% of paper forms.
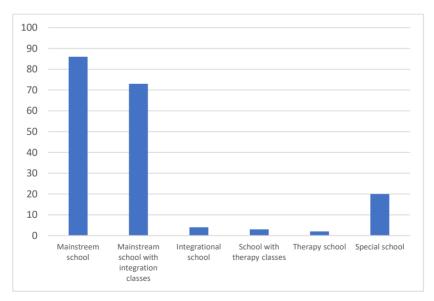

Figure 1. The actual distribution of the number of respondents by type of employment (N=188)

Source: Authors' research

Considering the number of teachers with experience in working with a student with a certified disability and SEN, to be able to conduct the data analysis, the above distribution was reduced to two groups: 1/ teachers from public schools (N = 86), 2 / teachers from other institutions (N = 102).
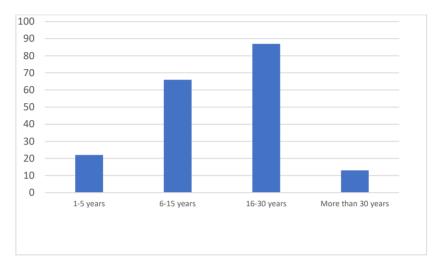

Figure 2. Distribution of the number of respondents by professional experience (N = 188)

Source: Authors' research

Research activities were conducted in two data analysis schematics: comparative (teachers at large schools / mainstream and others) and correlation (experience, type of institution vs components of definitions).

Own research results

Components of the normative definitions of inclusive education constructed by teachers

We conclude that the normative definition of inclusive education constructed by teachers is dominated by concern for a student with disabilities and other special educational needs (C1 value). Almost half of respondents also consider this to be promotion of full access to education for students subject to exclusion for various reasons, as well as a process of reducing educational barriers for all students. Other components highlighting the approach to inclusive education as

Figure 3. Distribution of selection of definition components among all subjects (N = 188)

Source: Authors' research

a system of activities and values building democracy are virtually absent in the opinion of the vast majority of respondents.

Definitions of inclusive education developed by teachers vs type of employment and professional experience

Professional experience in working with students with disabilities and the SEN seems to strengthen the dominant aim of inclusive education in the view of school teachers statutorily appointed in these roles, and at the same time diminishes their understanding of inclusive education as a "tool" for democratic development, as shown in Figure 4.

Whilst the first component still dominates in both groups of teachers, as far as the aims of inclusive education, understood as "every school for every student" (C4- C6), only mainstream school teachers are generally for it. The remaining respondents who appreciate these aims are only teachers from schools with integration departments (10 people in raw results). Pearson's correlation between types of facilities and components of the definition of inclusive education was -0.222, with a significance level of 0.01, which, although imperceptibly, confirms the tendency observed in the distribution of selections – the higher
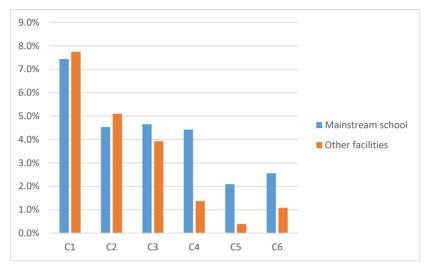
Figure 4. Percentage of the selection of the definition components in the groups of teachers of particular types of schools (N=188)

Source: Authors' research

the level of specialisation of the school facility as a place of employment, the further removed the inclusive education as the area of learning for all amongst teachers – everywhere.

Inclusive education understood as a process aimed at a student with a disability and SEN dominates among teachers regardless of their professional experience (Figure 5). The distribution of the other components is described further after the rejection of a small group of people in the study with more than 30 years of experience (13 respondents), considering they will not play any particular role in implementing the concept of inclusive education in the future. The number of teachers with up to 5 years of experience (22 people) is similarly small, but unlike the previous group, they can become leaders who will "colour the landscape" of understanding and implementing the idea of inclusion in schools, so it is worth considering them in the analyses.

Pearson's correlation coefficient between professional experience and components of the inclusive education definition was -0.143 at 0.05 significance level (weak relationship), which is statistically insignificant, but nevertheless suggests that with the increase in professional experience, it can place higher and higher in the understanding of inclusion as a road to build democracy, where every student is able to attend school close to home.
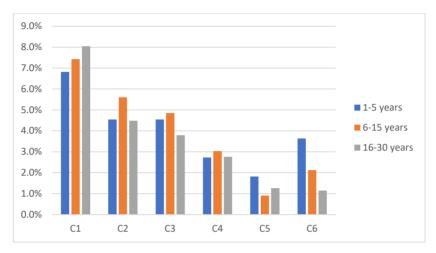
Figure 5. Percentage of the selection of definition components by teachers in groups with specific professional experience (N = 175)

Source: Authors' research

Please note that the professional experience and workplace were not significantly related to the C5 component: "highlighting the role of the school in building a local community, in value development and in raising educational achievements". This aim was noticed by a small group of teachers (18 teachers in mainstream schools and 4 from schools with integration departments), which may be a result of many factors. A research conducted by Mirosława Nowak-Dziemianowicz (2001, pp. 107–110) long before the introduction of inclusive education as a priority in Poland, revealed that teachers relate the requirements of the educational system to their own experience in working with students and whilst they may see the need for a change, they do not include them in their own activity planning. An indirect result of this is numerous doubts raised about one's own and school's (meant as an organisation: authors) educational skills. The results of our own research confirm the relationship between teacher experience and the normative definition of inclusive education. Teachers who work with students requiring special care often and for a prolonged time limit the understanding of inclusive education to the process of meeting the immediate educational needs of these students, basically ignoring their future social needs. They consider their chances of attending mainstream school at an average or low level (Chrzanowska, 2016).

Such concentration – despite the physical inclusion of students with various disabilities and SEN into the public-school space – can create a sense in teachers that maintaining a segregated education model is the right thing to do. In it 1 / many **specialists** *can cope better with a difficult student than I can*, **an ordinary teacher**, *so it would be better if the student found a place in another school*, *where* **the student would not interfere** *with the education of other students*, 2 / *I completed several post-graduate courses so that I don't* **give up** *SEN* **students** *to normal schools.* Such teacher attitudes, considered internal values based on experience and creating specific behaviours (Baron, Byrne, 1991, p. 138) will basically stop the development of inclusive education at the integration level, slow down the process of creating an inclusion culture at the school, making any teacher training related to technical and organisational competence "for inclusion" unnecessary. Using a metaphor, we have several options to choose from: 1 / if I do not like to walk in the rain, there is no point of owning an umbrella or a cape. If the weather is bad, I will stay home anyway, 2 / having an umbrella and a cape means I feel obliged to walk in the rain, though I do not like it, 3/ if I like walking in the rain, I'll take an umbrella and leave. The last of the metaphorical options cannot be linked to teachers with extensive professional experience with a student with SEN.

Components constructing a definition consistent with the ultimate idea of inclusive education, which prepares for participation in a democratic society (C4-C6), indicating the need to involve everyone in the school and around the school in social integration are basically ignored. The hope for inclusion is expressed by younger teachers (up to 15 years of experience), working in mainstream schools and those with integration departments at their schools. They are most likely less tired of working with students who, for various reasons, are at risk of social exclusion. Those teachers show a greater openness to the needs of everyone in the constructed definition. They might be more willing to personally create a school as an optimal development environment for democracy and to satisfy the diverse needs of students. Their enthusiasm can be vulnerable, however. This group is a minority employed in schools of all types, entering into a specific dynamic of relationships with older colleagues who, although with greater experience in working with students, are losing sight of the emotional field of attitude formation, the ultimate goal of inclusive education.

Summary and conclusions

The development of inclusive education, as an idea and practice, requires the adoption of a complex change management model. Topping and Maloney (2005,

p. 9) stress that a change occurs as a result of the interaction of many factors. The vision of aims is primary amongst them, followed by the development of the potential of resources, including teacher competencies and a consistent plan of action. The absence of vision is a source of confusion in the change, the lack of skills causes anxiety, the lack of adequate resources dedicated to the vision creates frustration, the absence of a coherent plan of action for change has resulted in different stakeholders charging forward whilst shaping the direction of the change.

The research conducted on a small population, in comparison to the number of employed teachers in Poland, reveals only some tendencies in assessing the state of the vision of inclusive education in the normative definitions constructed by teachers. However, these tendencies indicate that desired solutions can be postulated, including hiring younger teaching staff and careful reflection on the education and professional development of inclusive education teachers, creating the practice of inclusion. The mainstream school as a place of education for all students determines employment of highly qualified specialists in therapeutic work with disabled students and SEN, as well as highly professional teachers involved in education. While the idea of inclusive education as a priority in activities is not an empty word to be used for managing the education system in the country. Planning inclusive strategies should be accompanied by real job creation for teachers and teacher assistants in each classroom and employment of young people appreciating the value of education in democracy. Undoubtedly, teachers should be equipped with didactic and educational skills when working with students. In light of the trends detected in the study, the authors do not perceive the need to allocate „leadership" in inclusive education to special educators who, although highly *technically* competent (one could say that they are better at coping with the needs of students with developmental disabilities), they do not believe they can succeed. This creates a powerful emotional mix of attitudes and recognised values. The idea of inclusion based on the values of democracy speaks of *diverse* needs (showing differences but not uniqueness), not s*pecial* needs (suggesting segregation), so the profile of inclusive teacher education requires a new approach and global transformations of educational programs, in which the methods of satisfying diverse student needs and development of teacher educational, emotional and ethical skills are given equal place.

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