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Educational Paths for Children with Disabilities – Parents’ Dilemmas

ABSTRACT

In the discussion on children’s rights to education, no one doubts that a disabled child has the same rights as any other child to learn in conditions adapted to their age and needs. Currently, in Poland, there are three systems of education for students with disabilities: a segregated education system – schools and special centers; an integrated education system – integrated schools and schools with integration departments; an inclusion education system – mainstream schools. When a child has the choice about the need for special education, only parents or legal guardians have the right to decide on the choice of educational path. Two main objectives were formulated in the undertaken research: learning the motives of parents with children with a moderate intellectual disability in choosing a particular type of school and examining the extent to which they benefited from support in making this decision. The research material was collected thanks to the use of an interview questionnaire. The research group consisted of parents, mainly mothers whose children were in the first stage of education. Three subgroups of respondents were distinguished, the first subgroup were mothers whose children were covered by special school education, children of the second subgroup

KEYWORDS

disability, intellectual disability, special education, integration, inclusion

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of mothers attended an integration school, the third subgroup were mothers whose child enjoyed an inclusive education in a public school. The obtained research results prove that the decision to choose the educational path of one's disabled child depends on many factors, depending on the type of facility chosen.

The family of a disabled child

The birth of a disabled child is one of the biggest crises in functioning of the family. It is a difficult situation characterised by confusion resulting from insufficient information on the causes and type of the child's disability, emotional burden resulting from a myriad of negative experiences, sadness, shame, social isolation, helplessness and exhaustion from ongoing mobilisation and intensified efforts needed for providing care and upbringing to a disabled child.¹ Literature on the subject describes the phases which the family goes through after receiving the information about their child's disability. They are also referred to as stages of getting through a crisis and understood as a process of acquiring emotional and practical skills needed to deal with problems arising from a family member's disability.²

The parents raising a child with a disability inevitably experience a wide variety of emotional states, often ambivalent. A lot of place in their life is occupied by pain, sadness, despair and other feelings, which together contribute to a sense of suffering. There is, however, also room for joy, pride and hope, constituting a source of happiness. Małgorzata Kościelska³ states that fear is a prevailing feeling in parents' relationship with their child and the outside world. Fear is present in every family, starts when the child is born and, with varying intensity, accompanies the parents until they pass away.

¹ Cf. D. Kornas-Biela, *Wokół początku życia ludzkiego*, Poznań 2002, p. 99; M. Karwowska, "Dylematy macierzyństwa tworzonego dla niepełnosprawnego dziecka," in: *By człowiek nie musiał cierpieć. Księga jubileuszowa dedykowana Pani Profesor Aleksandrze Maciarz*, ed. A. Zych, A. Nowicka, Wrocław 2007, p. 293; Ż. Stelter, *Pełnienie ról rodzicielskich wobec dziecka niepełnosprawnego intelektualnie*, Warszawa 2013, p. 57.

² I. Obuchowska, *Dziecko niepełnosprawne w rodzinie*, Warszawa 2008, p. 254.

³ M. Kościelska, *Trudne macierzyństwo*, Warszawa 1998, p. 23.

Ewa Góralczyk lists the following types of fear experienced by a disabled child's parents:

- (a) persistent anxiety resulting from the accumulation of everyday worries about a child – constantly accompanying the parents;
- (b) fear for a child's life;
- (c) fear for one's health, particularly in the context of providing long-term care to a disabled child;
- (d) fear for the health of other members of the family;
- (e) fear for the future – uncertainty of the future of a disabled child interferes with planning one's and the family's future;
- (f) existential anxiety in connection with the inevitability of one's death.⁴

One of the responsibilities of parents towards their children directly resulting from performing care-giving functions is the choice of their school which, together with the family, is tasked with enabling a comprehensive development of a young person. The parents of younger disabled children are afraid to confront their offspring with new situations and such fear is particularly felt when the children commence their education.⁵ A specific psychological and sociological situation of such families requires a different approach to compulsory education and creates the need for a more intensive cooperation between the families and educational institutions. Knowing that, it is also important to remember that the families with disabled children are not all alike. Some parents do not understand the hurdles their child is facing and thus are unable to properly deal with them. Pre-occupied with their children's future they make parenting mistakes, being too demanding or overbearing. Oftentimes, however, having spent a lot of time searching for the causes of their child's developmental disorders and advice on dealing with difficult parenting problems, and after consulting various professionals and reading literature on the subject, the parents become true experts on their child's disability.⁶ The decision whether a child should be diagnosed and their

⁴ E. Góralczyk, *Choroba w życiu twójego dziecka*, Warszawa 1996, p. 26.

⁵ M. Kościółek, "Lęk rodziców wychowujących dziecko z niepełnosprawnością," in: *Dziecko a świat dorosłych*, ed. M. Duda, B. Gulla, Kraków 2009, p. 79.

⁶ C. Kosakowski, "Dziecko niepełnosprawne w szkole masowej – możliwości i ograniczenia," in: *Dziecko o specjalnych potrzebach edukacyjnych*, ed. C. Kosakowski, M. Zaorska, Toruń 2001, p. 60.

capabilities and developmental potential and learning difficulties assessed by professionals in a psychological and pedagogical guidance and counselling centre belongs solely to the parents. They also decide whether the opinion of the centre determining the need for special education will be submitted to the educational institution. The certificate recommending special education (issued by assessment committees based in guidance and counselling centres) states the type and degree of the disability and recommends the educational model. It also contains guidance on adjusting educational requirements to a child's individual educational needs. The certificate, however, is not conclusive and the decision on the choice of the educational path of a child belongs solely to their parents.⁷ According to Ditta Baczała, the parents pin certain hopes on their child starting school. The hopes placed on education manifest themselves as the expectation of:

... beneficial changes in a child's functioning; developing their social skills; teaching a child basic educational skills; easier access to financial, medical and social support; the school assuming some parental responsibilities; exploiting the full potential for a child's comprehensive development; ensuring safe learning environment.⁸

The author indicates that a child's education gives the parents a chance for personal growth as they can participate in the work of parent councils or cooperate in acquiring financial support or aid in kind.⁹ The decision on the choice of the educational institution is particularly important for a child's well-being and development. In case of children with disabilities pastoral care provided by the school can be more important than educational role. For many of them forging a relationship in a peer group will be more valuable for their psychological and emotional development than knowing fractions, historical dates or compass points. On the other hand, school achievements should not be underestimated as they motivate a disabled child to work. A school has the obligation to adjust teaching

⁷ A. Firkowska-Mankiewicz, G. Szumski, "Pedagogika specjalna i system kształcenia osób z niepełnosprawnościami w Polsce," in: D. Smith, *Pedagogika specjalna*, Warszawa 2008, p. 329.

⁸ D. Baczała, "Obraz pedagoga specjalnego w percepcji rodziców dzieci głębiej upośledzonych umysłowo," in: *Pedagogika specjalna – koncepcje i rzeczywistość. Konteksty pedagogiki specjalnej*, vol. 2, ed. T. Żółkowska, Szczecin 2007, p. 203.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 204.

methods to the child's abilities, but if, despite doing so, a child will be unable to meet the requirements, they will experience the bitterness of failure, stress, and it might be even necessary to change the educational institution.¹⁰

The rights of parents of children with disabilities

Nowadays, parents of children with varied degrees of disability are more aware of the responsibility for their children's development and they profoundly care about their future. In the scope of planning a disabled child's educational path, a parent has the same obligations as a parent of a non-disabled child, which is guaranteed by international law. Art. 26 of Universal Declaration of Human Rights reads:

Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.

- (1) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.
- (2) Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.¹¹

Another document which guarantees all parents the right to decide on the kind of education of their children is European Parents Rights Charter.¹² It was developed by European Parents' Association (EPA) and adopted in 1992. It emphasises the importance of parents in the educational system and their vital role in local communities. It stands by the view that the parents can demand that the officials

¹⁰ B. Grzyb, *Uwarunkowania związane z przenoszeniem uczniów niepełnosprawnych ze szkół integracyjnych do specjalnych*, Kraków 2013, p. 114.

¹¹ http://www.unesco.pl/fileadmin/user_upload/pdf/Powszechna_Deklaracja_Praw_Czlowieka.pdf [accessed on 24.10.2018].

¹² <http://rodzicewedukacji.pl/europejska-karta-praw-i-obowiazkow-rodzicow/> [accessed on 24.10.2018]; http://www.unesco.pl/fileadmin/user_upload/pdf/Powszechna_Deklaracja_Praw_Czlowieka.pdf [accessed on 24.10.2018].

and institutions responsible for the formal education of their children respect their right to play a primary and active role in the education of the child. The parents also have certain obligations towards their child and the school. The document stipulates the following rights and duties of parents in Europe:

- (1) Parents have the right to raise their children in a society without discrimination on the grounds of the colour of their skin, sex, ethnic, social background, disability, nationality, beliefs, gender orientation or economic position. Parents have the duty to raise their children towards a sense of responsibility for each other and for a humane world.
- (2) Parents have the right to recognition of their primacy as educators of their children. Parents have the duty to raise children in a responsible way and not to neglect them.
- (3) Parents have the right to full access to the formal education system for their children on the basis of their needs, talents and merits. Parents have the duty to commit themselves as partners in education to the school of their children.
- (4) Parents have the right of access to all information at educational institutions which concerns their children. Parents have the duty to give to their children's schools all information relevant for the attainment of the educational goals on which they work together. Parents have the right to choose the education which is closest to their convictions and to the values they hold dear in raising their children. Parents have the duty to make well-informed and conscientious choices about the education their children should receive.
- (5) Parents have the right to demand from the formal system of education to respect the spiritual and cultural background of the children. Parents have the duty to raise their children to respect and accept other people and their convictions.
- (6) Parents have the right to exert influence on the policy which their children's school implements. Parents have the duty to be personally committed to their children's school as a vital part of the local community.
- (7) Parents and their associations have the right to be consulted actively about the policy of public authorities in education at all levels. Parents have the duty to maintain democratic

representative organizations at all levels to represent themselves and their interests.

- (8) Parents have the right to public material assistance to take away financial impediments to the access to education for their children. Parents have the duty to give both time and personal commitment to their children and their school to support its efforts in attaining educational goals.
- (9) Parents have the right to high quality educational provision from the responsible public authorities.
- (10) Parents have the duty to help each other to improve their skills as prime educators and partners in the home-school relationship.

Moreover, Polish legal provisions on education, set forth in the Act of 7 September 1991 on the Education System¹³ and Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 9 August 2017 on the conditions of providing education and care to disabled and socially maladjusted children and youth and those at risk of social maladjustment,¹⁴ describe the conditions for providing education and care to children having a certificate recommending special education and detail the types of disabilities among children and youth. The target group includes students who are deaf, blind and students with hearing impairment, visual impairment, motor disability, including aphasia, mild, moderate or severe intellectual disability, autism, including Asperger's syndrome and with multiple disabilities. In 2016 as many as 10,4% of Polish population at the age of 15 and older had a disability certificate.¹⁵ A well-informed choice of the school for a child should be thoughtful and made after family discussions and active research. This awareness is vital for the future of the child. While choosing an educational institution for their child, parents should consider the institution's ability to provide care and education which

¹³ Ustawa dnia 7 września 1991 r. o systemie oświaty, (Dz.U. 2018 r. items 1457, 1560, 1669) [accessed on 24.10.2018].

¹⁴ Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji Narodowej z dnia 9 sierpnia 2017 r. w sprawie warunków organizowania kształcenia, wychowania i opieki dla dzieci i młodzieży niepełnosprawnych, niedostosowanych społecznie i zagrożonych niedostosowaniem społecznym (Dz.U. 2017, item 1578).

¹⁵ Data from BAEL GUS Biuro Pełnomocnika Rządu ds. Osób Niepełnosprawnych, <http://www.niepelnosprawni.gov.pl/p,81,bael> [accessed 10.09.2018].

their child will benefit from. In Poland, there are currently three systems of education for disabled children and youth:

- (1) a segregated education system – schools and special centers;
- (2) an integrated education system – integrated schools and schools with integrated special needs classes;
- (3) an inclusion education system – mainstream schools.

The education may take place in state or private schools. It is thought that, with the support of psychological and pedagogical guidance and counselling centers, parents should be able to choose a learning environment in which their child will feel safe and have best possible conditions for the development.

For each student with a disability, a chosen school has the obligation to develop an individual educational and therapeutic program adjusted to their abilities and needs. The program outlines remedial measures to be undertaken by the teachers and professionals working with the child. It also contains recommendations for supporting the parents and cooperating with other institutions helping the family, as well as specifies the scope of cooperation with the child's parents. The school's headmaster must inform the parents about the meeting of teachers and professionals developing the individual therapeutic and educational program for their child and the parents have the right to participate in this meeting as no one knows the child better than them. The team consisting of teachers, care givers and professionals is obliged to meet at least twice in a school year to perform a periodical, multidisciplinary assessment of how the student is functioning. In cooperation with professionals the program may be modified.

Being a primary unit of special education, special needs schools have been defined by UNESCO experts as:

Flexible system designed to facilitate the learning of individuals who have a wide variety of learning difficulties caused by external or internal factors, disadvantages in physical or psychological capacities Enriched form of regular education aiming at improving the quality of life of persons who function with a variety of disadvantages.¹⁶

According to Halina Borzyszkowska, the only task of such schools is to create the optimal conditions for a disabled student's

¹⁶ I. Chrzanowska, *Pedagogika specjalna*, Kraków 2015, p. 653.

development which would enable them to fully use their psycho-physical capabilities. Hence, the main goals of social education boil down to:

correcting dysfunctional behavior and improving psychological functions; practising motor skills and teaching vocational skills; forming habits and teaching practical skills necessary for work and participation in social life; developing proper social attitudes and teaching basic cultural principles; developing independence in everyday life.¹⁷

Special needs education is often associated with segregation and social isolation of disabled persons. Jadwiga Bogucka and Małgorzata Kościelska¹⁸ claim that segregated education does not guarantee many disabled children proper conditions for development and is a source of social isolation. Moreover, its main disadvantage is that schools are inflexible as they use methods and forms of work adapted for one type of disability. Creating segregated education system has had its drawbacks. Generations of children without disabilities have been growing up not being aware of the existence of their disabled peers. Understandably, a thought of choosing a special needs school for a child carries with it the fear of the child being labelled and stigmatized. As Jacek Błęszyński writes:

Unjustified delay in sending a child to a special needs school may stem, above all, from an ameliorative approach of the society to special (segregated) education, as well as from the lack of understanding of its place within education system as a whole.¹⁹

The supporters of special schools emphasize their advantages. Such schools were the breeding ground for highly qualified special needs teachers, fully devoted to the work with disabled children. It was there where many teaching methods which helped special needs students reach a point when they could start their working life were developed. Special education also ensures that the funds allocated to disabled children are safely and effectively managed. The students of

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ J. Bogucka, M. Kościelska, *Wychowanie i nauczanie integracyjne. Nowe doświadczenia*, Warszawa 1996.

¹⁹ J. Błęszyński, "Realia wspomaganie osób niepełnosprawnych w polskim systemie edukacyjnym," in: *Pedagogika specjalna – koncepcje i rzeczywistość. Konteksty pedagogiki specjalnej*, vol. 2, ed. T. Żółkowska, Szczecin 2007, p. 138.

special education become independent and gain a sense of autonomy, which would be more difficult in regular system of education.²⁰

Unlike in segregated system, the approach advocating inclusion education indicates the need for creating such educational methods which would enable children and youth with disabilities to acquire knowledge in natural environment among their peers with no disabilities. Małgorzata Kupisiewicz defines integrated schools as:

... educational institution where children with disability certificate recommending special education ... learn and are brought up in the vicinity of their homes, together with their peers with no disabilities. Schools in which most of the classes are taught according to integration principle are considered as integrated schools. ... In an integrated school, all children follow the same teaching program, but in the case of children with disabilities the content, form, educational methods and requirements are adapted to the child's specific developmental needs, physical and psychological capacities and their special educational needs.²¹

The literature on the subject mostly states three main goals of integrated education: bridging the gap between special needs and mainstream education, creating proper learning environment for disabled children, who have always comprised 1 per cent of mainstream schools' population, increasing the number of disabled children learning in mainstream schools.²²

Integrated schools enable a child to learn among children with no disabilities, which is impossible in special needs schools. The choice of the school belongs solely to the parents, but they have to consider many factors. Location of the school plays a very important role here (the vicinity of a child's home, good transport options). The fact that siblings of the child attend a given school also plays a part. Undoubtedly, the reason for this is to facilitate family life organization – seeing younger children off to school and bringing them home and easier route for older children going to school on their own. Location

²⁰ G. Stobart, "Czy psychologia potrafi uzasadnić ideę integracji dzieci o specjalnych potrzebach?" in: *Integracja dzieci o specjalnych potrzebach*, ed. G. Fairbairn, S. Fairbairn, Warszawa 2000, p. 44.

²¹ M. Kupisiewicz, *Słownik pedagogiki specjalnej*, Warszawa 2013, p. 386.

²² Cf. G. Dryżałowska, *Rozwój językowy dziecka z uszkodzonym słuchem a integracja edukacyjna, model kształcenia integracyjnego*, Warszawa 2007, p. 76.

of the school is also important as integration at school is the first step towards social integration.²³

Integrated classes are smaller than those in regular schools, with just 15 to 20 pupils, including 3 to 5 disabled children. Children are taught by two teachers, one must be a qualified special needs teacher (teaching assistant / a teacher helping in the organization of the educational process) and the other a teacher qualified in e.g. teaching young learners. The presence of two teachers is necessary as disabled children follow individualized learning programs and need special help while learning. Integrated education has many advantages. The research conducted by Agnieszka Żyta among parents of children with intellectual disabilities indicate that 81% of the respondents saw multiple chances for children with intellectual disabilities learning in integrated environment. However, 77% of the surveyed spoke of possible risks. Intellectually disabled children learning among their peers with no disabilities could be subjected to humiliation, bullying, aggression, isolation and disdain.²⁴

Inclusive education is yet another educational model used to teach disabled children. This type is considered the most advanced from of integration. The model brought with it the need for a new occupation - a personal assistant for a disabled person. Their job is to facilitate active participation of a disabled person in social life, as well as provide them with care and support their family. Parents or legal guardians of a student with recommendation for special education can apply for employing such person. The main principle guiding inclusive education is enrolling disabled children in classes at regular schools. In such model all children follow the same educational program. Special support is kept to a minimum here. According to Petro Husak and Helena Bielkina-Kowalczyk,²⁵ inclusion is a process

²³ Cf. M. Przybyszewska, "Rodzice uczniów kształcących się w klasach integracyjnych – ich motyw i oczekiwania," *Interdyscyplinarne Konteksty Pedagogiki Specjalnej* 2014, no. 6, p. 59.

²⁴ A. Żyta, "Szanse i zagrożenia integracyjnego kształcenia i bytowania osób z głębszą niepełnosprawnością intelektualną," in: *Integracja osób niepełnosprawnych w edukacji i integracjach społecznych*, ed. Z. Kazanowski, D. Osik-Chudowska, Lublin 2003, p. 32.

²⁵ P. Husak, H. Bielkina-Kowalczyk, "Inkluzja jako forma nauczania dzieci o szczególnych potrzebach edukacyjnych," *Studia i Prace Pedagogiczne* 2014, no. 1, p. 145.

which enables all children to enjoy mainstream education. Its aim is to prepare each educational institution to teach children with various educational needs. Such educational model requires changes not only in the structure, methods and techniques currently used in schools, but also in attitudes to teaching children. In inclusive education, the main goal is to create conditions for individual development and creative growth of each student with special learning needs. “A primary goal of inclusive education is helping a disabled person to reach independence in line with the principle: equal rights, equal responsibilities.”²⁶ The authors quoted above list the following principles of inclusive education:

Despite differences and arising difficulties, all children should learn together; educators take into account different needs of students; quality education should be provided to all students; educational programs should take into account specific teaching strategies; the school should encourage students’ contribution and act in partnership with local communities; children with special educational needs should be provided with additional support in their educational process.²⁷

Inclusive education must be properly organized. Among other things, students should be supported in learning and have access to psychological help. The learning environment should facilitate developing talents and enable students to achieve best possible results. The school must develop an individual educational and therapeutic program and adapt teaching methods to recommendations provided in the student’s disability certificate. Moreover, disable students and their teachers must be provided with all possible forms of support pursuant to legal regulations so that a safe learning environment and care is guaranteed and the teaching methods are adapted to the students’ capabilities and needs (e.g. using the help of additional teacher or auxiliary staff, providing proper equipment, using appropriate textbooks, educational materials and teaching methods). The aim of all undertaken measures should be to support the child’s integration

²⁶ J. Kruk-Lasocka, “*Samostanowienie, edukacja inkluzyjna a integracja na poziomie przedszkolnym,*” in: *Pedagogika specjalna – koncepcje i rzeczywistość. Konteksty pedagogiki specjalnej*, vol. 2, ed. T. Żółkowska, Szczecin 2007, p. 91.

²⁷ P. Husak, H. Bielkina-Kowalczyk, “*Inkluzja jako forma nauczania dzieci o szczególnych potrzebach edukacyjnych,*” *Studia i Prace Pedagogiczne* 2014, no. 1, p. 146.

with their peers. Pursuant to legal regulations, school headmasters and teachers have a variety of possibilities in this scope and the school receives increased funding in connection with disabled children attending the classes. Parents of disabled children see the need of inclusive education but also repeatedly emphasized that the measures should not be addressed only to children, but also to the parents and school staff, including auxiliary workers.²⁸ In the academic year 2016/2017, 73,3 thousand students with special education needs attended primary schools in Poland. They comprised 3,2% of the total population of primary schools. Among them, students with mild intellectual disabilities constituted the biggest group, (25,1%), followed by students with multiple disabilities (18,7%), autism, including Asperger's syndrome (16,2%), motor disabilities, including aphasia (11,6%) and moderate or severe intellectual disabilities 11,1%).²⁹

Despite the existence of several educational paths, parents of disabled children state that the choice of the school for their child is difficult.

While reading information published by the Ministry of Education and listening to the government officials I get the impression that we live in parallel worlds. By we, I mean the parents of children with special educational needs (at least those I know – I cannot speak for everybody). The Ministry claims that the situation looks good, regulations are perfect and they guarantee our children all they need, that the Ministry of Education provides support and advice and considers inclusive education as very important. Our world, the world of the disabled children and their parents, happens to be darker. So, why is it so bad when it's so good?³⁰

²⁸ J. Skibska, "Wymiary spostrzegania integracji i edukacji włączającej przez rodziców dzieci w młodszym wieku szkolnym uczących się w klasach integracyjnych. Komunikat z badań," *Niepełnosprawność. Dyskursy Pedagogiki Specjalnej* 2016, no. 23, p. 149; J. Skibska, "Wiedza rodziców dzieci w młodszym wieku szkolnym o edukacji włączającej oraz jej ocena. Komunikat z badań," *Niepełnosprawność. Dyskursy Pedagogiki Specjalnej* 2016, no. 23, p. 164.

²⁹ www.niepelnosprawni.pl [accessed on 10.09.2018].

³⁰ A. Kossowska, <http://dzielnymfranek.blogspot.com/2018/08/swiaty-rownolege-iogosenie-o-prace.html> [accessed on 10.09.2018].

The author's research interests

The author's interests and the empirical research she conducts concern a specific group of disabled students: children with moderate intellectual disability. Understanding and critical analysis of educational system available for this group requires extensive knowledge of the challenges that persons with moderate intellectual disability face. According to DSM-5, a manual published by American Psychiatric Association in 2013, intellectual disability involves general impairments that influence a person's functioning, including adaptive abilities.³¹ In line with DSM-5 classification, there are three main domains in which intellectual disability is diagnosed. The first area concerns the conceptual domain covering language, math, reading, writing, reasoning, knowledge and memory. The second, social domain, includes empathy, adaptation, interpersonal communication, ability to make and retain friendship and similar capabilities. The third area, practical domain, centres on self-management (personal development and self-control) in such fields as personal care, job responsibilities, money management, leisure and organizing school and work tasks. Impairments in the above mentioned areas are present with increased severity in children and youth with moderate intellectual disability.³² Pursuant to a new Act of December 2016, the Law on School Education, the students with moderate and severe intellectual disability are taught in 8-year primary special needs school and 3-year vocational school. Those institutions work pursuant to the Regulation of the Minister of Education of 14 February 2017 on the core curriculum for pre-school education and the core curriculum for general education in primary schools, incl. for pupils with moderate and severe intellectual disability, and for general education in first-grade sectoral vocational schools, general education in special schools preparing for employment, and general education in post-secondary schools.³³

³¹ I. Chrzanowska, *Pedagogika specjalna*, op. cit., p. 240.

³² E. Zasępa, *Osoba z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną. Procesy poznawcze*, Kraków–Warszawa 2016, p. 43.

³³ Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji Narodowej z dnia 14 lutego 2017 w sprawie podstawy programowej wychowania przedszkolnego oraz podstawy

As it was mentioned before, parents of children with intellectual disability, also moderate, can choose from three educational paths and enroll their children in special needs, integrated or inclusive schools. The author's interest in the motives for making this choice and the parents' expectations towards the chosen schools was the starting point for her research on the schooling situation of students with intellectual disabilities. Within this scope, two main objectives were formulated: to learn about the motives behind the parents' choice of educational path and establish whether they used any support in making this decision. The main research problems were the following:

- (1) What factors influenced parents while choosing the educational path for their children with moderate intellectual disabilities?
- (2) Did they consult anybody before making the decision? If so, whom?

The research material was gathered in interviews based on the questionnaire developed by the author, as it was deemed the most appropriate for the chosen research problems. The questionnaire included questions to parents about the motives behind choosing a school for their child with diagnosed intellectual disability and searching support in making this decision. The author also asked about the parents' expectations towards the schools and to what extent these expectations were met, the analysis of which is not the subject of this article.

The research was conducted in a group of parents, representative of general population, making a decision about their child educational path. It consisted of thirty parents, mainly mothers of children diagnosed with moderate intellectual disability. Additionally some children had been diagnosed with multiple disabilities (autism spectrum disorder - ASD, motor disability). All children in the group, aged 8 to 13, were at the first stage of their education and attended primary schools in grades 1-3. The first subgroup included mothers whose children were taught in special needs schools, the second subgroup - mothers of children attending integrated schools and

programowej kształcenia ogólnego dla szkoły podstawowej, (...) (Dz.U. 2017, item 356), Annex 3 and 5.

the third - the mothers of children enjoying inclusive education in mainstream schools. Limited access to mainstream schools teaching children with moderate intellectual disability prevented the author from conducting a more extensive research and for that reason each of the subgroups consisted of only 10 persons. All families resided in Świetokrzyskie voivodship. Each parent was interviewed individually with the use of questionnaire. The interviews took place at schools. The research material was gathered in the summer semester of 2017/2018.

Parents on the choice of segregated education

In answers to an open question concerning the choice of the school and special needs education for their children, the mothers mostly stated that the most important thing for them was the fact that a given special needs school met their expectations on the children's special needs. The presence of qualified special education staff and small classes were frequently mentioned. Other factors impacting the choice of the school included positive opinions of other parents whose children attended a given school, accessibility of special needs activities and one-to-one classes. It is apparent that the parents thoroughly investigated the special needs school's therapeutic and educational offer. The parents were also asked whether they consulted the choice of the school with a professional. The vast majority of the respondents gave an affirmative answer, indicating the conversations with the school's headmaster and teachers. However, it was not true for all respondents. Although a disabled child's parents may see a special needs schools as appropriate for their child, it is essential that they consult their opinion with professionals working in the chosen school. Parents, as people knowing their child the best, the school's staff, headmaster and teachers who know the school should together choose the best possible educational path for the child in question. A vast majority of the surveyed parents thought that consultation of their decision was necessary, which indicates that the choices they made were well-informed and not hasty. A small number of the surveyed mothers did not consult their decision on the educational path with anybody.

Parents on integrated education

The vast majority of the parents of children with moderate intellectual disability who attended integrated classes said that the main motivation for choosing such school was integration of their child with peers with no disability, which is the main goal of integrated model of education. The mothers also indicated the fact that the child had already known other children in the class, most often from an integrated pre-school group, impacted their decision. Other factors included school's support in learning, well-qualified teachers and the school's reputation. One of the parents said that they chose an integrated class due to the child's learning difficulties. Strangely, none of the parents mentioned the factor relating to the specific nature of working with a child with intellectual disability. The children whose parents took part in the research were diagnosed with moderate intellectual disability, which may cause considerable difficulties in adjusting the requirements to their special needs in a class with children with no disabilities. Another question asked to the respondents was whether they consulted anybody before making the decision. Most of the mothers said they did. They quoted their conversations with a psychologist, school's counselor and headmaster, as well as talking to teachers during an open day at the schools. Although the interviewed parents failed to mention the appropriate motives for choosing their child's school, the author was glad to notice that most of the parents consulted professionals on their decision (school, guidance and counselling center). The researched group, however, also included parents (a tiny minority) who made the decision on the choice of the educational path for their disabled child alone, without any consultation.

Parents on inclusive education

The respondents asked about their choice of educational path for their disabled child also included parents of children with diagnosed moderate intellectual disability attending inclusive classes in mainstream schools. The main factor impacting the choice in this case was the fact they had already known the school's headmaster and teachers, other parents (very often they had known them socially).

Other motives included attractive extra-curriculum activities in the school and location of the school. The vicinity of the school to the child's home turned out to be the decisive factor for many mothers. Interestingly, none of the mothers mentioned special needs of their child as a factor impacting her decision. The parents were also asked whether they consulted their decision with any professionals. Most of the respondents said they consulted their choice and mentioned mainly the conversations with the school's headmaster and teachers. There were also mothers who made this decision alone without consulting anybody. To sum up, although the parents were not thinking about their child's special needs when choosing a school, it is positive that they consulted the decision with professionals experienced in inclusive education.

After analysing gathered empirical material, it is clear that, depending on the chosen educational system, there are many reasons why parents of a child with intellectual disability choose a given school. For parents choosing a segregated model, the most important factor was adapting the school's requirements to the child's needs, for those who chose integrated model – integration with other children, and for inclusive model – knowing the staff of the school. Notably, the parents take into account opinions of other people and the overwhelming majority consulted their decision with professionals. They benefited from support of guidance and counselling centers and educational institutions, as well as other parents with experience in the area discussed.

Final notes

It can be observed that regulations and ordinances of the Ministry of Education have introduced many changes in organization of education for children and youth with special needs. Subsequent legal acts provide more and more liberty in organization of work in educational institutions, employing staff, curricula, activities and the scope of cooperation with families and local communities. Learning outcomes achieved by disabled students, such as independence and self-sufficiency in personal development and social life directly depend on how the provisions are used and adapted to the specific needs

of the area (rural areas, city).³⁴ The research conducted by Agnieszka Kossowska, revealed that parents of disabled children feel that they are perceived by headmasters of pre-schools and schools as demanding, constantly asking for something, problematic or even hostile, wanting the impossible, visionaries.³⁵ Educational institutions cannot impose on the parents the decision on the choice of the future of their child. They should, however, provide extensive and objective information helping to understand the idea, principles and mechanisms in a given education model. “Informational support of the parents provided by educational institutions may prevent the parents from making mistakes resulting from not knowing the law on education and steer them into undertaking rational measures beneficial for their child’s development.”³⁶

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³⁴ Cf. I. Chrzanowska, “*Strategia kształcenia osób niepełnosprawnych. Diagnoza pozoru*,” in: *Człowiek z niepełnosprawnością w rezerwacie przestrzeni publicznej*, ed. Z. Gajdzica, Kraków 2013, p. 178; K. Ćwirynkało, U. Bartnikowska, “*25 lat funkcjonowania Ustawy o systemie oświaty. Tendencje w kształceniu uczniów ze specjalnymi potrzebami edukacyjnymi*,” *Niepełnosprawność. Dyskursy Pedagogiki Specjalnej* 2016, no. 23, p. 99.

³⁵ A. Kossowska, *Rodzic dziecka ze specjalnymi potrzebami edukacyjnymi – wróg czy przyjaciel nauczyciela?*, *E-Biuletyn SPE, specjalne potrzeby edukacyjne*, Warszawa 2018, p. 12.

³⁶ K. Parys, “*Ciągłość i zmiany w systemie kształcenia specjalnego – ujęcie normatywne i funkcjonalne*,” in: *Teoria i praktyka oddziaływań profilaktyczno-wspierających rozwój osób z niepełnosprawnością wobec tradycji i innowacji*, vol. 4, ed. G. Gunia, A. Ochman, M. Trojańska, Kraków 2017, p. 51.

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