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ON THE CHALLENGES OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION, OR HOW TO TELL A CHILD ABOUT DISABILITY*

Introduction: The concept of inclusive education is a consequence of dynamic social processes as a result of which people with disabilities freed themselves from dependence and social exclusion. The primary space for the implementation of the idea of inclusion are educational institutions. The unveiling of complex educational experiences prompts the search for a variety of artifacts that prepare children to understand the phenomenon of human disability.

Research Aim: The purpose of the analyses is to draw attention to the complexity of problems arising from inclusive education and to propose their solutions based on the literature, which does not define human (child) disability, but tells about disability.

Evidence-based Facts: The issue of human disability is in permanent discourse. One of its consequences is inclusive education as a consequence of the historical experiences of people with disabilities and as a response to the need to create a society open to diversity. It was assumed that early experiences acquired in childhood, beliefs about disability itself will not remain indifferent to behaviour and beliefs in adulthood. Organizing education in a common space has become a warp of various artifacts that support the understanding of the phenomenon of human disability. One of them is literature.

Summary: Inclusive education as an idea of democratic learning subverts barriers and exposes exclusion. Achieving these goals requires critical thinking about one's identity and the role of difference in the process of social identification. Where difference is understood as being oneself is a value, and the word is used to obtain awareness. Literature created for children, parents and teachers dealing with the phenomenon of disability is one of the very important didactic means of understanding disability, forming empathy and the attitudes necessary to build a society open to diversity.

Keywords: inclusive education, concept and issue of people perception, disability

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INTRODUCTION

Even though the idea of inclusive education is not a brand-new concept, it is only since the year 2020 that Poland has been seeing its intensive implementation. At the foundation of inclusive education as an educational system lies the placement of all learners in a shared educational process, as well as the common organization of the local environment. The implementation of the idea of inclusive education is predominantly the domain of educational institutions, and in particular, of schools of primary education, whose main purpose is to ensure access to education for all learners, and especially for the ones in need of special care. The focus on the diverse needs of students requires additional support, partnership with multiple entities, and proper preparation (particularly) of teachers for work with children with special needs (Syndyk, 2004). The literature on inclusion is extensive and often controversial, but it certainly does not undermine the idea itself. Nevertheless, it emphasizes organizational conditions, methods and forms of work, a multidimensional and multifaceted approach to education, and especially flexibility (MEN, 2020). One could succumb to the temptation of arguing that, on the one hand, inclusive education has a dynamic character, but on the other, it cannot be implemented without referring to the developmental processes of every child. An undeniable fact is that the experiences acquired under natural conditions, based on clarification, narration, or lived experiences, are invaluable, although their organization is not obvious, especially due to the contemporary discourse on disability. Its presence allows us to move away from the categorization of disability but does not provide clear (often expected in education) answers to inquiries about its true nature. This directly results from the process of perceiving another person (a person with a disability). This process may be influenced by stereotypes, or, by referring to acquired knowledge and personal experience, it may also have a descriptive character. The problematic nature of disability encourages a continuous search for means (methods and forms) that will facilitate every child in constructing a picture of a diverse world. Among many, literature holds a significant place.

RESEARCH AIM AND QUESTION

The issue addressed in the article concerns children with disabilities, their peers, and their teachers. The phenomenon of disability itself must indeed be explored and comprehended from the perspective of all participants of the encounter. The way (the method) of narrating the surrounding reality as a diverse space which is open to diversity is of particular importance here. Therefore, the field of inquiry is captured in the following question: How should one talk to a child about disability? The objective of the research is to identify selected specimens of children's literature that describe the phenomenon of disability, which helps strengthen the

child's cognitive, emotional-motivational, and instrumental sphere. The research also seeks to highlight the complexity of issues arising from inclusive education and propose solutions based on literature that does not define disability in terms of the human (child's) condition, but instead narrates disability and organizes experiences for children in a way that helps them develop personal competences to understand and create a diverse social environment. The applied content analysis of the literature, considering its diversity, aimed to identify opportunities for its application in group work employing techniques such as animation, art, and dramatization.

EVIDENCE-BASED REVIEW

Inclusive education assumes full participation of learners with disabilities in social life. The success of all and any actions in this area depends on numerous factors. There is no doubt that in this process it is important to understand the phenomenon of disability in people (children) and to (also) place them outside of biological conditioning and isolation. The success of these actions relies on construction in educational experiences of an image of the other person. In this context, a paramount role is attributed to the teacher. Teacher's competencies and attitudes toward inclusive education are key to achieving the intended outcomes (Chodkowska & Kazanowski, 2005). Preparing an individual to be a member of a diverse community is a lengthy process. There is no straightforward formula here, and therefore not clearly defined (described) course of action. Identifying with inclusive education requires openness towards all the participants. In this article, in its consecutive parts, attention is drawn to the changing reality as regards the perception of disability, which is significant for organisation of the educational process, as well as for the role of early experiences in a child's perception of self and others for understanding the phenomenon of diversity. The objective of the focus on literature intended for children, parents, and teachers is to explore narratives that address the phenomenon of disability in various contexts.

The discursive dimension of disability

The adoption of the disability model within the medical-cultural context has paved the way for understanding disability from a dynamic and evolving perspective, considered within a broadly interdisciplinary framework. Viewing human disability as a process allows it to be seen as a diverse and distinct way of functioning across various personal and social domains. It is a fluid state, subject to a range of influences (Paszkiewicz et al., 2001). The historical and multifaceted perspective on disability tells the story of individual and collective experiences of totalitarian regimes, medical progress, and economic and cultural shifts. One may claim with

full confidence that contemporary understanding of disability and of functioning of people with disabilities encompasses all of these experiences. Today, people with disabilities are seen through the lens of human subjectivity and they are no longer appropriated by medicine, rehabilitation, educational stigma, or social exclusion. This group no longer exists merely as recipients of organized support, but instead they increasingly seek to define their own lives and actively engage in the social decision-making processes that shape their life. Garland-Thomson (Goodly, 2011, p. 14) argues that disability "is linked to the cultural and historical community that questions the materiality of the body, and the social constructs used to interpret bodily and cognitive differences". In this context, a person with a disability becomes a product of culture shaped by people with disabilities and centred on differences. One of the ways of gradually overcoming these differences has been, and continues to be, conceiving disability in terms of normalization, which moves away from political and social regulations in favour of accessible patterns of everyday life. The adoption of the assumption that that disability is a relative, situational, or contextual category is reflected in the International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (2021). The notion of disability has been extended by the concepts of action and participation, taking into account of course their diversification in terms of the structure of the body, the scope of potential responsibilities, and the ability to fulfil social roles. This orientation makes recognition of disability conditioned by a person's behaviour in such a way that actions are defined as inadequate only when they deviate from the accepted cultural norm. Looking at social reality and listening to declarations of acceptance of disability, the availability of education, or rehabilitation, one might be tempted to believe in the participation of people with disabilities in the all-encompassing culture of consumption. Sztompka (2005, p. 40) refers to this as a "dictatorship", which is a façade of freedom. For many people with disabilities, however, this remains a fiction. The lack of means to access it becomes a "painful awareness of its absence" (Adams, 2006, p. 525) and is often a source of risk, potentially leading to a regression to institutional segregation (Giddens, 2008). The return of people with disabilities to a world of dependency would be a failure of education, the economy, and social systems. This fact undoubtedly triggers reflection on the human condition, considering our diversity. It is difficult to prepare anyone for participation in a process of such rapid changes, to build protective mechanisms, or to anticipate the future. The opportunity lies in fostering interpersonal connections from an early age by creating opportunities for mutual understanding and recognizing that, while we are all distinct individuals, we are also one. The difference would then become a natural, obvious, and characteristic trait of every individual. This shift in thinking is seen in the process of inclusive education, which harnesses the developmental potential of each individual to create conditions that foster self-realization (Federowicz et al., 2015; Zaorska, 2022). After all, a correlation has been found between

the diagnosis of disability in a child and his or her life experiences, which are often distorted by rehabilitation or educational institutions. The idea of integration, implemented by the Education System Act of 1991, assumed that every child had the right to education. The task of educational institutions became to support the development of all children who attend them (Soroka-Fedorczuk, 2007), as well as to strengthen diversity as a component of each person's (child's) biographical identity. However, research on the effectiveness of the integration process revealed a variety of problems that institutions struggled to address. There was a lack of acceptance for children with disabilities. The main factors influencing this attitude were biological conditions (Syndyk, 2004), prejudice (Sikorski, 2000), an increased sense of threat and helplessness among children with disabilities (Kowalik, 2011), open segregation, and the superficial implementation of good practices conditioned by formalized control (Szumski, 2011; Pachowicz, 2013; Parys, 2014). We have successfully moved away from stigmatizing terms for people with disabilities, but the phenomenon of social exclusion "in limited access to resources, goods, and institutions, which consequently generates the deprivation of needs" (Nestorowicz, 2013, p. 26), has been (and still may be) observed. By assuming that school is a microsystem within a macrosystem and that early experiences and beliefs about disability will not remain neutral for behaviours and beliefs in adult life, we have taken a step forward. The new concept of inclusive education, and one could even claim the concept of a "deepened community", is an education of shared space, diversity, and the nurturing of equality and justice (Gajdzica et al., 2021). Creating the culture of such a community in an era of many discourses on disability is neither an easy nor a short process, as it is based on differences that require understanding and description. However, from the perspective of building an inclusive society, it is a necessary action (Jachimczak, 2018, p. 48).

The concept and essence of perceiving individuals – creating the image of a person

Mutual coexistence in respect for diversity depends on many factors, however, thanks to our early experiences, shaped by actions, explanations, and shared presence, we are able to place ourselves within a peer group, and later on within society. For children with disabilities, this process may often be more challenging due to the way they function, as it is related to how they perceive the world and their place in it. From a psychological perspective, "perception is a complex system of processes through which a subjective image of reality, called a perception, is formed" (Tomaszewski, 1975, p. 226). As a result, perceptions of things, people, events, and situations emerge at a semantic-operational level. Object perception and social perception, as distinguished by Mądrzycki (1986), enable an individual to form a general image of the perceived person, including aspects that describe and evaluate. Our perception of others is often associated with seeing them as creators of ac-

tions, to whom certain intentions and responsibility for the consequences of their actions and life circumstances can be attributed (Domachowski et al., 1984). From the perspective of individuals with disabilities, attributing responsibility for their situation can lead to stereotypes, isolation, and exclusion. Therefore, it is important to create spaces that allow interactions between students with disabilities and other students, thereby fostering mutual understanding in perception and action. The emerging intragroup perception allows for the understanding of the relationships within the group, as well as linking them to certain expectations, to which specific components are assigned. These include attribution (assigning temporary and permanent properties to a person) as well as assigning expectations and evoking emotions (Skarżyńska, 1981). Since this process is dynamic, it can be influenced by organizing education and planning and preparing intended educational situations. This is especially important, as social perception has specific regulatory functions. It allows individuals to understand the surrounding reality, recognize the physical properties and emotions of others, and attribute intentions to the behaviours of others. Inclusive education provides a space for these experiences for another reason as well. The categorizations we make in social perception relate to comparisons such as "similar to me-not similar, I like it-I don't like it" (Wojciszke, 1986, p. 16). It is an abstracted space based on generalized knowledge, but it offers great potential in the form of details, discoveries, mutual understanding, and liberation from fear and uncertainty. It is also a space in which every child becomes equipped with social skills and competencies that will be applicable in real-life situations and other spaces beyond the educational institution. Referring to the process of creating an image of a person, one cannot overlook the role of factors crucial for perceiving one's individual situation. Our ability to fulfil our personal goals is dependent on our self-perception in relation to others. Descriptive and affective feedback provided by the social environment complement and complete our self-image and self-perception (Lewicka, 1985). This is a realm of deeply impactful experiences, as human development is a lifelong process shaped by biological, psychological, and sociocultural contexts. Therefore, depending on the quality of creation of a broadly understood inclusive space of our existence, the image of a person with a disability may change.

How talk to a child about disability?

Let me begin my search for the answer to the question posed above by pointing out how we should not talk about disability. Definitions, clear-cut statements, classifications, and spaces that place a person (child) with a disability within the perspective of biological and medical dependencies should be avoided. To talk about disability is to adopt the perspective of a long narrative, open to new experiences, exploration, and discovery without setting any time constraints. By gradually expanding his or her experiences with others, a child begins to discover previously

unknown qualities of people around them and to learn how to modify the actions of others towards him or her (Skarżyńska, 1981). As development progresses, the child's life becomes influenced by groups of increasing significance. During school years, peers become a significant source of influence. A peer is an attractive subject for the child's discovery. The first contact with them is crucial for shaping mutual relationships with other people, including those with disabilities.

> Initially, a child evaluates their peers based on how they are perceived by individuals who represent social authority. Then, social accommodation occurs, which is the process of becoming aware that there are differences between people and acknowledging this fact. As acceptance of differences in appearance or behaviour of peers gradually increases, intolerance towards the differences of others significantly decreases. (Stefańska-Klar, 2000, p. 146)

Of no minor concern in this process is the role of the child's developing language, which during language acquisition becomes something more than just a mere auxiliary tool for problem solving and it begins to function as an extension of thought and has an impact on perception and actions. During this time, a social representation of other people is also formed, which is a subjective reflection of their qualities. The role of the school (the classroom) is, therefore, to organize experiences for every child in relation to other children at school (in the classroom) so that this representation can emerge. Especially that as the child matures, the descriptive categories used by the child increasingly focus less on external, physical characteristics and more on internal, mental qualities of a person (Soroka-Fedorczuk, 2007). Organizing inclusive education at school is not an easy process. In 2021, the report *Inclusive Education in Poland* revealed the multitude of issues including: inadequate preparation of teachers who work with students, a lack of specialists in institutions, inadequate infrastructure, insufficient cooperation among staff members, and a shortage of educational materials and teaching aids. These statistics do not inspire optimism, as children with disabilities are already pursuing mandatory school education and the goal is to ensure that the educational process is not an experiment. It is important to remember that the school and the classroom also include the presence of other children who have no experience with disabilities, for whom meeting a child with a disability is a first-time experience.

There is no solution to solving all the problems at once. I believe that first and foremost we need to create situations in which we can experience being together, getting to know one another, working together, and, as a result, develop compassion for disability through empathising, providing help, and collaborating. Łukaszewski (2011), referring to literary texts, remarks that "the very same phenomenon may be discussed in many different ways" (p. 15), gaining a broader perspective on the phenomena under discussion. Narratives and stories related to universal human experiences are a source of moral messages and prototypes for

social roles. They can be a source of meaning for the child and provide answers to existential questions (Straś-Romanowska, 2010). When reading or listening to a story, children notice similarities between their personal memories and the world presented in the text. Children also identify with a particular aspect of the story, often the narrator or a character. There are many literary sources that can be helpful in talking about disability, including: Fournier (2020), *Chromosome Kids Like Me* (topics related to chromosomal aberrations); Kossowska (2018), *Big Matters in Small Heads* (stories told by children with disabilities); Michta (2019), *Benio, Dad, and the Rest of the World* (how to cope with a loved one's disability); Piotrowska (2011), *Yellow Circles* (Down syndrome); Piróg (2021), *Little Flame Learns to Breathe Fire* (understanding empathy). I would particularly draw the reader's attention to *Fairy Tales Without Barriers*. This is a series published by "Światełko" Parents' Association of Children with Disabilities consisting of 26 psychoeducational fairy tales by Aleksandra Chmielewska (2015–2017) and Joanna Maria Chmielewska (2015–2017). Each fairy tale presents a unique topic that addresses the complex issues of disability (Asperger syndrome, autism, ADHD, epilepsy, Down syndrome, mobility, vision, hearing impairments, speech disorders, chronic illness, intellectual disability, kidney disease, heart defects, atopic dermatitis, integration classes, dyslexia, cerebral palsy, cancer, selective mutism, limb loss, architectural barriers, assistant for a child with disabilities, child of a parent with disabilities). Their content (similar to the previously mentioned works) is filled with a unique, child-friendly language. They relate to natural emotions and experiences. The stories take place in a real-world environment, allowing children to recognise themselves in them. The characters in the fairy tales include children, adults, nature, and objects. Organizing activities based on *Fairy Tales Without Barriers* through diverse forms of content exploration, character journeys using animation techniques, arts and crafts, dramatization, and group work can strengthen the child's neurotic, emotional-motivational, and instrumental spheres.

Equipped with knowledge, children handle difficult situations better and, most importantly, increase their sense of well-being. As a result, they achieve a higher quality of life. The *Fairy Tales Without Barriers* series can also serve as a foundation for bibliotherapy, as it provides information that is subjectively selected and processed in the internal narrative of a child who reads or listens to the stories. Expanding one's knowledge and acquiring self-awareness is of significance for changes occurring in child's self-structure. Literature, especially its proper processing, can help the child re-evaluate experiences, internalize new content, and ultimately construct a new internal narrative. Inclusive education often evokes the "school for all" motto, but we should not give in to the illusion that all children will have the opportunity to equally benefit from these rights. I believe it is difficult to eliminate the subtle demographics of disability. Creating and building an educa-

tional community for both able-bodied children and those with various dysfunctions resulting from cognitive or behavioural issues will always require thoughtful consideration and a broad perspective of interventions. It is essential to ensure that children do not painfully experience their existence. Organizing spontaneous interactions with peers within and outside the institution, fostering acceptance rather than mere tolerance, are not goals that are easily achievable. These must be accompanied by thoughtful actions and sufficient time. Therefore, schools and teachers should not be afraid of getting to know children through conversations with parents, caregivers, and specialists. The goal is for the phenomenon of disability to become a part of everyday educational life, where we do not shy away from answers, and experiencing the world goes beyond familiar methods and forms. This can be reflected, for instance, in illustrating diversified construction of objects with exactly the same function. Working with the content of *Fairy Tales Without Barriers* (and other above-mentioned works) can provide a foundation for organizing dialogue situations between children. The (educational) dialogue, in all its complexity, is fundamentally a conversation among all participants. Grounding dialogue in content that addresses the complex issues children face can foster mutual openness, understanding, emotional closeness, and the initiation of actions that support one another (Ramik-Mażewska, 2012). For the teacher, facilitating educational dialogue in a diverse group presents a challenge, requiring them to overcome their own communication barriers, such as judgment, offering ready-made solutions, and the tendency to disengage from the concerns of others. This last aspect is particularly linked to a strong inclination toward value judgment. Downplaying another person's problem or imposing one's own perspective reinforces the stereotype of someone less valuable or dependent (Mellibruda, 1986). Properly organizing a dialogic situation, though not an easy task, enables all participants to explore the world at an appropriate pace, discover their identity, and define their autonomy. It is essential not to fear dysfunctions but to seek understanding of actions that stem from limitations. Any teaching method that promotes inclusion without leading to exclusion is justified. For children with diverse developmental challenges, the focus should not solely be on the level of knowledge attained, but rather on the atmosphere of the learning environment, the language used by the teacher and peers, the feeling of belonging to the group, and the sense of the importance of each child's voice. Identifying with the group plays a significant role in motivating the child to be an active part of it. Text analysis and the preparation of a dialogic situation require careful planning by the teacher. It would be beneficial for teachers to anticipate, even if only partially, the children's actions based on their understanding of the group. Teachers should also focus on teaching both how to listen and how to hear. True listening involves a commitment to understanding the other person. To claim that we are actively listening, we must teach children to listen empathically, which means understanding and appreciating communication

styles that differ from their own. This is a lengthy and challenging process, but it frees us from the "auto-stereotype of the Other", a trap easily fallen into within the educational setting.

SUMMARY

The introduction of the concept of inclusive education into the education system has sparked extensive debate among researchers who examine educational reality. Identifying unequivocally the clear course of action that would respond to the ever-growing needs arising from this process proves challenging. This complexity stems, in part, from the ongoing discourse surrounding the phenomenon of disability, with participants offering varied perspectives on its implications for the lives of affected individuals. On the one hand, some highlight challenges in social life; on the other hand, the biological aspect is not overlooked. At its core, however, inclusive education seeks to address differences by integrating them into the broader concept of diversity. By building on children's early experiences through thoughtful educational practices, inclusive education opens up opportunities for encountering differences and fostering mutual understanding. Diversity, in the form of otherness, is a fundamental aspect of human existence. As Mayor and Bindem (2001) put it, "children currently living are the future adults, the guarantors of the durability of an ethics oriented towards the future" (p. 493). At its heart, inclusive education aims to dismantle barriers and expose exclusion for what it is. Achieving these objectives requires a critical examination of one's own identity and the role that difference plays in social identification. Literature that addresses disability, particularly works aimed at children, parents, and teachers, is an essential educational tool. It not only fosters understanding and empathy but also encourages attitudes that are vital for building a society that embraces diversity.

CONCLUSION

Inclusive education, by its very nature, implements the democratic principles of teaching. It should encourage critical thinking and emphasize the importance of difference as a key element of social identity. In this context, difference, understood as embracing one's authentic self, becomes a value, and language is used as a tool for raising awareness. Achieving these objectives requires openness to various sources of knowledge and approaches, as well as an acknowledgment of the equal significance of the diverse experiences of all participants in the inclusion process.

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WOKÓŁ WYZWAŃ EDUKACJI WŁĄCZAJĄCEJ, CZYLI JAK OPOWIADAĆ DZIECKU O NIEPEŁNOSPRAWNOŚCI

Wprowadzenie: Koncepcja edukacji włączającej jest konsekwencją dynamicznych procesów społecznych, w wyniku których osoby z niepełnosprawnością uwalniały się od zależności i wykluczenia społecznego. Podstawową przestrzenią realizacji idei włączania są placówki oświatowe. Odsłaniające się złożone doświadczenia edukacyjne skłaniają do poszukiwania różnorodnych artefaktów przygotowujących dzieci do rozumienia zjawiska niepełnosprawności człowieka.

Cel badań: Podjęta w artykule problematyka odnosi się do dziecka z niepełnosprawnością, które w grupie rówieśniczej doświadcza kontaktu z pełnosprawnym rówieśnikiem. Celem analiz (badań) jest zwrócenie uwagi na złożoność problemów wynikających z edukacji włączającej i zaproponowanie ich rozwiązań w oparciu o literaturę, która nie definiuje niepełnosprawności człowieka (dziecka), ale o niepełnosprawności opowiada.

Stan wiedzy: Problematyka niepełnosprawności człowieka jest w permanentnym dyskursie. Jedną z jego konsekwencji jest edukacja włączająca jako następstwo historycznych doświadczeń osób z niepełnosprawnością i jako odpowiedź na potrzebę tworzenia społeczeństwa otwartego na różnorodność. Przyjęto założenie, że nabyte w dzieciństwie wczesne doświadczenia, przekonania dotyczące samej niepełnosprawności nie pozostaną obojętne dla zachowań i przekonań w dorosłym życiu. Organizowanie edukacji we wspólnej przestrzeni stało się osnową dla różnorodnych artefaktów wspomagających rozumienie zjawiska niepełnosprawności człowieka. Jednym z nich jest literatura.

Podsumowanie: Edukacja włączająca jako idea demokratycznego nauczania obala bariery i demaskuje ekskluzję. Realizacja tych celów wymaga krytycznego myślenia o swojej tożsamości i roli różnicy w procesie społecznej identyfikacji. Gdzie różnica rozumiana jako bycie sobą jest wartością, a słowo służy uzyskiwaniu świadomości. Literatura odnosząca się do zjawiska niepełnosprawności skierowana do dzieci, rodziców i nauczycieli jest ważnym środkiem dydaktycznym pozwalającym zrozumieć niepełnosprawność, kształtować empatię oraz postawy konieczne do budowania społeczeństwa otwartego na różnorodność.

Słowa kluczowe: edukacja włączająca, pojęcie i istota spostrzegania osób, niepełnosprawność