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The educational pressure of norms. Critical remarks on the sidelines of work with children with special educational needs

This text seeks to show the complex issue of special educational needs, both in the area of the used terminology and the forms and methods of the adjustment of the schools' educational demands of pupils with such needs. When viewed from this perspective, the dilemma of the organisation of formal educational frameworks facilitating or hampering education to such pupils seems to be of considerable significance. Contrasting the individualisation of the process of education with the normalisation of demands, we only apparently solve the problem of education for everyone, taking into account their capabilities and difficulties.

When in 1978, in the British Parliament, Mary Warnock presented a report of the commission working under her guidance for three years, probably none of the listeners expected that the phrase "special educational needs" used in the Report of the Committee Enquiry into the Education of Handicapped Children and Young People (Olechowska 2016: 24) would play such an important role in education in future. Politicians and educational activists were aware of the fact that education did not take into account the variety of needs and capabilities of a considerable number of pupils. Soon, we also witnessed an emergence of definitional and terminological controversies as well as questions or doubts as to the reasons behind the formulation of the particular categories of special needs displaying the different approaches of researchers and practitioners of education. The current discussion on the shape of education for pupils with documented disabilities shows how difficult it is to clearly understand the possibilities and forms of delivery of school education and adjustment of educational requirements to the needs of pupils with special educational needs.

The phrase "special educational needs" applies to such needs which require adjustment of the housing and didactic conditions of educational establishments to the individual developmental and cognitive capabilities of pupils. Therefore, the satisfaction of the special educational needs of the pupils consists in making it possible for them, despite their difficulties manifesting themselves in a variety of

ways, to use schools available to the general public, with simultaneous adjustment of the requirements concerning the pupils' capabilities (Chrzanowska 2015: 423). The expression "special educational needs" was an answer to the growing need of the individualisation of education, and therefore Warnock's report mainly presenting possibilities for a wide inclusion of disabled pupils to ordinary public schools only became a pretext to a broad discussion on other groups of pupils with special educational needs. From 7 to 10 June 1994, more than 300 participants of a conference in Salamanca, Spain, discussed the idea of education for everyone. Signed by representatives of 92 countries (including Poland), *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action in Special Educational Needs* (hereinafter referred to as the Salamanca Statement) opened up prospects for education for everyone taking into account the capabilities and needs of pupils with special educational needs. The guiding principle of the Framework for Action is the recommendation of education covering all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, linguistic, and other conditions (Salamanca Statement).

In 1998, the Polish Ministry of National Education (MEN) issued a document called the Reform of the System of Education of Pupils with Special Educational Needs, which, with some delay, executed the previously signed Salamanca Statement. In place was the act of 7 September 1991 on the system of education (uniform text: *Dziennik Ustaw* of 2016, It. 1943) and regulations. At present, the most important document for the education of pupils with special educational needs is the currently valid regulation of the Minister of National Education of 30 April 2013 on the provision of psychological and pedagogical assistance in public kindergartens, schools, and establishments (*Dziennik Ustaw* of 2017, It. 1643).

The regulation specifies categories of pupils with special educational needs, i.e. pupils:

- with disabilities;
- with social maladjustment;
- at risk of social maladjustment;
- with special talents;
- with specific learning difficulties;
- with disturbed verbal communication;
- with chronic diseases;
- in crisis or traumatic situations;
- with educational failures;
- from underprivileged environments related to the pupil's and their family's life circumstances, manners of spending free time, and environmental contacts;
- with adaptation difficulties related to cultural differences or a change of the educational environment, including those connected with the previous schooling abroad.

All the above categories of pupils with special needs should be covered by psychological and pedagogical assistance at kindergartens, schools, and educational

establishments. Such an assistance may also be provided to the pupils' parents and teachers. In this area, it consists in supporting parents and teachers in solving behaviour-related and educational problems as well as developing their character-forming abilities to increase the effectiveness of psychological and pedagogical assistance extended to pupils.

In light of international documents and the regulations of the Minister of Education, the situation of pupils with special educational needs seems to be developing favourably, covering an extensive group of various difficulties and indicating ways and forms of the provision of therapeutic assistance.

However, in school practice, many irregularities can be noticed – mainly due to an ineffective system support (Chrzanowska 2015: 425). It results from the data contained in the System of Educational Information that there were 158, 748 disabled pupils in all categories of disability with documented special educational needs, which constitutes 2.68% of all children in educational establishments in Poland in the school year 2012/2013. Similar data were recorded in Great Britain, where the share amounted to 2.8%. It seems, however, on the basis of research conducted in the 1980s and 1990s that many children do not have documents confirming their special educational needs. Research indicated that the real share of such pupils amounted to 5–10% (Chrzanowska 2015: 431). Apart from disabled pupils, it is also worth paying attention to the specificity of other groups of pupils requiring support in school education; some of them have special educational needs covering several categories from the MEN regulation, while the difficulties of other children fit one of them, e.g. specific learning difficulties related to dyslexia. In the educational practice covering the organisation of assistance and the adjustment of education to the needs and capabilities of pupils, the above generates difficulties related to the financing of the support, in particular when it is necessary to organise assistance to children with several learning difficulties. The situation in this scope is most comprehensively illustrated by the research carried out in Poland as a part of the monitoring of the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (The right to education of children with special educational needs) in 2010. The study covered 121 schools in 61 communes. Of these, 61 were primary schools, and 60 lower secondary schools. The study was focused on the problem of the execution of regulations concerning the education of pupils with special educational needs (Ciechanowska, Chmielewska, Czyż, Kołodziej after: Chrzanowska 2015). It resulted from the opinions of school heads that the highest share of pupils with special educational needs in the schools covered by the study were pupils with specific learning difficulties. Opinions confirming such difficulties, issued by psychological and pedagogical counselling centres, covered 14.3% of all pupils in the primary schools under study, and 15.2% in the lower secondary schools participating in the study. A similar share of pupils with dyslectic difficulties (pupils with specific learning difficulties) is indicated by researchers involved in long-term research into the issue, while relevant literature provides that this type of difficulties are experienced by 10–15% of pupils, including 4% of pupils with enhanced symptoms of difficulties (Bogdanowicz, Adryjanek

2004: 23). An interesting conclusion formed on the basis of the above research material was the form of assistance directed at schools to pupils with specific learning difficulties. The form of assistance extended most frequently was the lowering of educational demands in relation to such pupils. School heads blamed the absence of other forms of assistance, individualisation of teaching, or pedagogical therapy in the scope of work with pupils with specific learning difficulties, on organisational difficulties or the shortage of funds. The school heads paid particular attention to the organisational difficulties. These include: the necessity to organise additional transport to school for children living at a considerable distance away from the school, the absence of interest in additional classes on the part of the parents, low effectiveness of such classes, and the shortage of qualified specialists in the area of the specialist treatment of specific learning difficulties (Ciechanowska, Chmielewska, Czyż, Kołodziej after: Chrzanowska 2015: 437).

Another group of pupils with special educational needs is that of pupils with special talents. This is not a mutually exclusive category, as among the talented pupils there are also pupils with specific educational needs, disabled pupils – also including ones with intellectual disability – and pupils representing other groups of learners with difficulties. The task to develop the potential of these pupils in school education is not fulfilled, although it might seem that these pupils are a group with which teachers achieve educational successes. It is in relation to them that Sylvia Rimm used the phrase “Underachievement Syndrome” (Rimm 2009). According to the author, talented pupils are often also children who do not achieve school successes. Being focused on a type of cognitive abilities, the school prefers the abilities which make it possible for children to learn considerable amounts of knowledge, and in effect prepare talented pupils for school subject Olympiads or competitions. All other abilities: artistic, drama, sport, or social ones, are not as valued and are noticed only by teachers of artistic subjects which traditionally have a lower status in the school hierarchy. The achievement of educational successes by talented pupils is not made any easier by the notion of “a good pupil”, whom the school defines as one who acquires good grades in all subjects. Educational rivalry does not foster the development of the sense of success in pupils who are highly gifted in selected areas. In the school environment, there are not enough opportunities for success and too many situations in which one may experience a failure (Rimm 2009).

A separate issue in this area is the educational situation of disabled pupils with special talents, which is relatively rarely analysed in the literature devoted to talents. Talented pupils with various types of disability are individuals who may be successful despite their disabilities, such as the impairment of sight or hearing, orthopaedic defects, or intellectual learning difficulties. Talented pupils with a disability need education taking into account their talents, while at the same time taking into account the degree and type of their disability (Klinkosz 2004: 94). As a part of the previous special and separate manner of education of the disabled, the focus was on their disability and preparation for the possibly comprehensive ad-

aptation for independence rather than on their capabilities and talents. In the context of the above analyses of selected categories of pupils with special educational needs, an issue emerges concerning the functioning of school as an educational institution, its role, open and non-open procedures, and effects of its activity.

In open procedures, school is perceived as a form of organised action, focused on the achievement of goals and determination of the means allowing their achievement (Dyrda 2009).

The non-open rules ordering the functioning of pupils in educational institutions include norms ruling the determination of the pupils' position in the system. Relevant literature defines the notion of "norm" in a variety of ways, starting with the etymology of the word – initially meaning a square – "a device for laying a right angle in the construction industry"; a norm in this approach is tantamount to everything that is contained within its edges, with its content depending on the acceptance of one of the recognised manners of its understanding (Dyrda 2009):

- encountered in the majority of representatives of a given species;
- falling within the average value of a measurable feature;
- consistency with the rule, regularity.

The first understanding of the term norm highlights its biological nature, indicating the external and the internal consistence of the build, appearance and functions of the organs with those commonly found in a given population. Differences in this scope are most socially noticeable. The attitudes of discrimination, isolation, and even sentencing to death of the disabled recorded in antiquity and medieval times indicate the absence of the social acceptance of biological deviations in the course of history. Also the 19th century, with its scientific approach to the classification, description, and identification of developmental differences, organised segregation in terms of developmental disabilities, placing pupils who experienced them (albeit not denying them the right to education) in isolated establishments delivering separate forms of education in terms of methods and contents. From the practical point of view, the above was to protect the disabled from the open, "able-bodied" society, but also to protect the society against the awareness of the existence of various biological dissimilarities. It was only in the second half of the 20th century that social attitudes changed, which was caused by the humanization of life and purposeful actions of institutions (Obuchowska 2005).

The second area of the interpretation of norms indicates its understanding in the scope of measurable features, which in educational areas concerns mainly a reliance on measurements of intelligence and pointing to values contained within the intellectual norm. It was as early as in the second half of the 19th century that Francis Galton, using the Gaussian normal distribution curve, presented the area of human mental abilities, indicating with the help of a standard deviation the range considered the norm of intellectual capabilities. The psychometric method he initiated continues to be used for the determination of the level of intelligence even today. The tests functioning today are primarily criticised for (Gardner, Kornhaber, Wake 2001):

- the convergent nature of tasks, which means that the tested individual has to find an answer that has been fixed in advance and is used solely for the measurement of intelligence and capabilities;
- the norm-setting approach referring to a statistical reference; results of tests of intelligence are graded against results of the group, which constitutes a normalization sample;
- their quantitative nature, which is to stress their objectivity, with the result always expressed as a digit;
- standardisation based on the uniformity of tasks, procedures, and the manner of the evaluation of the intelligence level;
- the use of tables of norms taking into account the age of the tested individuals and cultural and verbal updates, but disregarding differences in their cultural and verbal status.

The meaning of the third area pertaining to the term norm is most broadly represented in education, at the same time providing an opportunity to abuse the principles, as well as rules and regulations drawn up on their basis. This is because the consistence with a rule assumes consistence with every rule determined in the area of school education, which thus becomes mandatory. Examples in this scope include school rules and regulations, assessment criteria, external tests, as well as the determination of who and in what scope a person is able to meet the thus-formulated expectations. In connection with the issue under discussion, i.e. with special educational needs we may pose a risky thesis that in the understanding of the norm determined in this way, this area simultaneously determines all those who are unable to fully meet the expectations as to the manner of participation in education determined by the school. Also Małgorzata Jacyno turned her attention to the above, arguing that “The new ‘deviations’ no longer have, which is easy to notice, the same power of exclusion from the educational process and are no longer life sentences, [...] but rather they are ‘a specific disability’, which does not determine the final grade and does not decide about one’s failure at school [...]” (Jacyno 2007: 162). Taking into account the above understanding of the term norm, we may identify the areas sanctioned by the institutionally understood school (Dyrda 2009: 634).

Among the areas of norms understood in this sense, particularly important are:

- biological norms – determining the minimum level of health, fitness, intelligence, and speech production;
- intellectual norms – determining one’s ability to use the required manners of thinking (logical, abstract, or rational), and to acquire the abilities to read, write, and count;
- social norms – determining the required level of communication abilities, behaviour, and personality requirements indispensable for the execution of social tasks; and
- norms of knowledge – determining the level of school knowledge required at each stage of education.

As a part of institutions, clear interpretative procedures are specified, constituting unchangeable rules defining correct or normal behaviours and detailing their desired effects (Dyrda 2009: 629). Norms as such also contain a certain aspect of the necessity to respect them, and a demand to comply with their requirements. Although most of them are neither open nor precise, compliance with them is universally considered a guarantee of the pupils' success at school. The critique of the normative approach of educational institutions implies a different direction of searching for organizational frameworks – ones facilitating the learning of children with special educational needs. This direction is the individualisation of teaching, which in pedagogy reaches back to the 20th century. The individualisation seems to be a process facilitating children's development, and enabling the adjustment of the school's educational impacts both with regard to the children's developmental potential and the difficulties they experience. This phrase is contrasted with the notion of uniformization, the standardisation of expectations and the imperative of complying with the norms. To the teachers, referring to the pupil individually is tantamount to singling them out from the ordered collectiveness and anonymity. It is a contrast to a description of a day in an 18th century orphanage presented as a place of anonymity and order, as quoted by Michel Foucault: "We found all the pupils drawn up as if for a battle, in perfect alignment, immobility and silence" (Foucault 1977).

The presented picture raises an unending longing of, hopefully very few only, also contemporary teachers, for whom pupils are anonymous performers of commands, who in extreme cases are called upon to answer by their number in the class register. Therefore, it seems obvious that, when selecting a model of education based on the power over an anonymous collection of pupils, and striving to make them uniform, teachers refer to the archaic understanding of school. Individualisation identified with taking into account the pupils' individual capabilities, and at the same time "bowing to" their limitations clearly seems to be a universally desirable state in general pedagogical reflections (Rimm 2009; Robinson 2011). However, also this naive perception of individualism in educational actions may lead to shifting responsibility for the pupils educational failures to the pupils themselves, as the school did its best to facilitate their education by taking into account their special needs. "The observed 'deviations' from norms and the recorded 'shortages' ultimately make up an individual and unique life history of a person. In line with this logic, to individualise oneself is to see oneself among those who have been described in most detail, examined in the most comprehensive manner" (Jacyno 2007: 159). The notion understood in the above way locates individualisation as a process which on the one hand is marginalised by the diagnosis, while on the other also excludes the "non-described" from the community, thus excluding them from the school's standard actions and expectations directed to others.

Taking into account the applied criteria of the assessment of the work of school based on the Educational Added Value, the comparison of schools of one type (lower secondary schools, technical upper secondary schools and general education up-

per secondary schools) with the help of the EWD calculator on the basis of results of external examinations actually ranks schools using statistical methods (www.cke.edu.pl/wskazniki-ewd/). In this situation, pupils with special needs are perceived as the ones who lower the external examination results, while teachers of the subjects covered by examinations try to talk these pupils into resigning from taking their secondary school final examinations (*matura*).

The difficulty in the solving of the dilemma: normalisation or individualisation in education, lies in the fact that both the sanctioning dimension of the norms presented above, and the individualization of pupils with special educational needs contribute, in contrast to the intentions of the creators and promoters of the solution, to the former's selection and exclusion from the educational mainstream of the school. Therefore, the dilemma is paradoxical: the individualisation of pupils may simultaneously become a new type of norm in the face of such a perception of individualisation, which, taking into account the description of individuals in the categories of their educational needs and difficulties, at the same time alienates them through a detailed characterization of their deficits and shortcomings, thus excluding them from the community of pupils who are not covered by such a procedure, as they fit the norms and rules contained in the expectations of the school in its institutional dimension. "In a sense, the power of normalization imposes homogeneity [...], by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialties and to render the differences useful; by fitting them one to another" (Ball 1990: 96).

Attributing importance to individualization processes as the stigmatisation of individuals through diagnoses, we basically refer to the level of their biological dissimilarity. Sensory, physical or intellectual disability have their own medical and educational picture. When strengthened with the authority of medicine, diagnosis seems to be correct. For this reason, we are experiencing the process of the medicalization of other categories of special educational needs.

Medicalization of various human conditions or problems, being the goal of actions directed at the profit of biotechnological companies, is possible owing to manipulations with criteria, borders between norms and pathology, exaggeration of threats, and the transformation of risk factors or normal biological states into illnesses. However, this is only possible when science participates in these processes (Nowakowski 2013: 14).

The author of the above quotation underlines the process of manipulation with the borders between the norm and pathology, and includes in its justification the orientation of pharmaceutical concerns' towards the generation of profits. The search for reasons behind the advancing medicalization of learning difficulties or educational needs lies outside the problems I am discussing, although it is an interesting thesis for further discussion. Medicalising practices towards pupils with special needs are also present in the classifications of diagnostic criteria. In the classification of the American Psychiatric Association (DSM-5), pupils with specific

learning difficulties are located in the chapter devoted to specific learning disorders (Gafecki, Świącicki, eds., 2015: 33), while phrases such as “impairment in reading”, “impairment in written expression”, and “impairment in mathematics” are used for the coding of the difficulties. The DSM classification constitutes a significant source of knowledge on the gist of learning difficulties also in Poland (Bogdanowicz 2006). As a result of the medicalization practices, children with special educational needs are subjected to pharmacological treatment; for example, the drug *Concerta* is used for the treatment of attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder with attention deficit disorder, while the drug *Piracetam* – for the alleviation of dyslexia-related difficulties. On the *Informacja Leków* [Drug Information] website, both these medicines are recommended for the treatment of children in the above areas. Therefore, summing up, it can be suggested that despite the recommendation of the individualisation and adjustment of schooling to the needs of children with special educational needs, the diagnosis turns out to be yet another form of a separation of those pupils who are stigmatized with their diagnosis, and subjected to pharmacotherapy from their peers fitting the norms.

Instead of a conclusion, I would like to look at the issue of special educational needs from the point of view accompanying many initiatives aimed at the extension of education that have been undertaken all over the world. Both the main educational programme of UNESCO (Education for All), and the documents referred to above (Salamanca Statement) or the UNESCO report drawn up by Jacques Delors (Delors, ed., 1998), underline the significance of universal education for the future. The possibility of participation in public, free education is becoming the centre of efforts of governments and social organisations. Education based on the four pillars of learning: learning to know, to act, to live together, and to be (Delors, ed.: 1998), is a challenge for the 21st century. The documents that are most significant at the global level stress a universal access to good, non-discriminating education. In this paper, I have sought to analyse the educational situation, learning difficulties, and forms of assistance and their effectiveness in relation to children with special educational needs. My long-term therapeutic work with this group of children, as well as the significance of the issue in question for education, are my justification behind the presented argumentation.

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Documents

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Summary

The educational pressure of norms. Critical remarks on the sidelines of work with children with special educational needs

The text discusses the matter of pupils with special educational needs, whose ability to function in public educational establishments (kindergartens, schools, etc.) is governed by the international documents and regulations of the Minister of National Education. The problem of educating pupils with special needs concerns both the formal and organizational sides of support and specially organized activities, as well as the critical reflection of subordinating them to the expectations of the institutional school, and their distinct individuality. The ambivalence of the described group of pupils' ability to function is based on the existence of certain privileges and opinions in the context of stigmatizing them, and their possible failure to meet standards and expectations formulated within the institution.

Keywords

special educational needs, schooling standards, individualization in teaching, medicalization

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