

FACTORS CONDUCTIVE TO INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN POLISH PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE OPINION OF PARENTS

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Abstract. *The importance of inclusive education for the education system and more effective social inclusion of students with special educational needs (SEN) and care for its quality in schools is an issue raised both in Europe and more widely at international level. In 2017, a modification of legal provisions in the field of providing psychological and pedagogical assistance to pupils with special educational needs in Poland was introduced. A year later, the Children's Ombudsman conducted a diagnostic survey, which aimed at getting to know parents' opinions about the state of inclusive education and the support offered to pupils with SEN in mainstream schools. The obtained data suggest that in the opinion of parents 76 schools participating in the study, situation of SEN students can be assessed as satisfactory. Nearly 80% of children attend schools in the vicinity of their place of residence. The teachers and specialists employed in schools are rather well prepared to work with pupils with SEN, they often implement recommendations contained in the opinions issued by psychological and pedagogical counseling centers.*

Keywords: *inclusive education, special educational needs, mainstream primary schools.*

Introduction

"It is clear that this move towards inclusion and social integration has required a major shift in our thinking... Most of us know in our hearts that we are moving in the right direction and that we are slowly becoming a more accepting and inclusive society. However, many of us find that we are still looking for tools to help us put our beliefs into practice."

Annie Rousseau

Friends Make the Difference (Inclusion BC, 2014)

The Act on the Education System, modified in 2017, constitutes the basis for taking more and more effective impacts on students with special educational needs (SEN) in public schools in Poland, thus putting into life the idea of inclusive education. The new solutions introduced by the Ministry of Education in the area of education policy indicate that the priority of kindergartens and schools should

be to achieve full, real inclusion and integration of their child or student with disabilities, by enhancing its development, individualization and supporting it during group activities or class, as well as removing barriers and limitations hindering the functioning of a child or student in a peer group and participation in the life of a kindergarten or school (see Journal of Laws of 2017, item 2198). As shown by Skałbania & Babiarez, inclusive education is the result of socio-educational changes aimed at improving the quality of education in the field of humanism and social egalitarianism. According to the authors, this is possible only when the idea is understood and implemented with the reflection, understanding, acceptance and involvement of all education entities: teachers, parents and students. In the extreme case, this can be a space of unfavorable changes, which instead of including and integrating can exclude and marginalize the student (Skałbania & Babiarez, 2018, 17). This article is an attempt to determine these conditions of a SEN student's school situation, which, according to one of the subjects of effective education - i.e. their parents, create space for the full development of its potential.

Methodology

The aim of the study was to get to know parents' opinions of SEN students on the factors that foster inclusive education in public primary schools in Poland. The impulse to analyze the school situation of this group of students was triggered by the requests of the parents addressed to the Ombudsman for Children's Rights to assess the level of implementation and the level of meeting the needs of their children in the conditions of a public school. Acceding to these requests, the Ombudsman established a Team for educating students with special educational needs, which included: special pedagogues, psychologists, members of non-governmental organizations acting to support children with disabilities and developmental deficits, scientific and didactic employees and parents of students with SEN. The team developed a questionnaire for parents of SEN pupils. The study used a nonprobability-probability sampling of the subjects. The educational stage was indicated intentionally - primary schools, but specific schools were drawn from among all those included in the list of Polish public primary schools. Finally, 445 parents of children with SEN from 76 primary schools from all over Poland took part in the study. In the vast majority (64%) these were parents of students of older primary school (aged 10 to 14 years) whose special educational needs are most often caused by specific learning difficulties - 49.2%, intellectual disability - 13%, disorders from the spectrum of autism including Asperger's syndrome - 11.5%, ADHD - 9.7%, motor disability - 9% and chronic disease - 7%. The authors of this article have been commissioned to develop the report. Statistical analyzes were carried out in SPSS for Windows.

Research results

One of the most significant challenges of inclusive education is to fulfill the right to education by providing access for SEN students to a high-quality and meaningful place in education system. This objective can be reached by adapting education to their various needs. For the first time, specific attention to the right to inclusive education for all persons with disabilities was paid during *the UNESCO World Conference on Special Needs Education: Access and Equality* in 1994. Signed by 92 Governments, the resulting *Salamanca Statement* required mainstream schools to provide quality education to all students, without discriminating on the basis of the higher requirements of support that they may need. *The Salamanca Statement* proclaimed that every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities, and learning needs and provided that ‘those with special educational needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them within a child-centered pedagogy capable of meeting these needs’. It also asserted that ‘regular schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all’ (*Salamanca Statement*, 1994). Bearing in mind the importance of these assumptions, the study sought to find out how the right of a child with SEN to take up and continue education closest to their place of residence is implemented in schools to which the children of the surveyed parents attend and how the needs of this group of students are met. Parental reports show that nearly 65% of students with SEN attend public schools, and 24% attend integration classes. 9% of them receive education in integration schools, and 2% in mainstream schools with special classes (Fig.1).

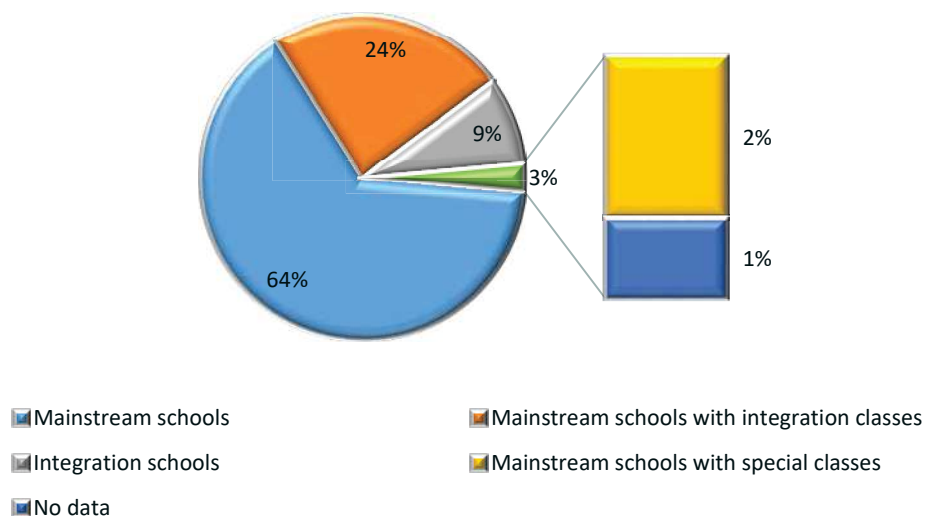


Figure 1 Types of schools attended by SEN students (own study)

Nearly 80% of children attend schools in the vicinity of their place of residence, and 20% for various reasons use educational services of schools located outside their area of residence. As parents indicate, 10% of students changed their school during education. Out of the 47 parents participating in the survey, twenty-five (53%) made such a decision due to the change of their place of residence, and eight due to the lack of implementation by teachers of the recommendations contained in the opinion on the need for special education issued by a psychological and pedagogical center and difficult relations with teachers or headteacher. Some parents felt compelled to change the educational institution in which their child received education under the pressure of its headteacher or they wanted to interrupt the child's conflicts with its peers and the conflict with the parents of other children. Sixteen parents indicated other reasons for this decision. These included, among others: difficulties in learning their child is struggling with (N = 2), lack of meeting school's basic needs of their children (N = 2), looking for a school with special classes (N = 2) or integration classes, family problems (N = 2). Individual cases of school change were related to: inappropriate student treatment by the school headteacher, inappropriate teachers' attitudes towards the child, lack of supporting teacher in the school, too many students with autism in one class, placement of a child in a foster family or in an educational facility. The decision about choosing the institution in which the child is to receive education in Polish law is at the discretion of its parent, but the recruitment experience of parents of children with SEN indicates that there are cases of pressure from the psychological and pedagogical counseling centers or from a particular educational institution in making such decisions. That is why parents were asked to share their own experiences in this regard. In the opinion of the parents of the students from the 76 participating schools, it is very rare that the employees of psychological and pedagogical counseling centers or mainstream schools exert pressure on the SEN pupils' parents in relation to the type of school their children would attend. A detailed analysis of the frequency of making such attempts leads to the conclusion that, in the opinion of the vast majority of parents, neither the psychological and pedagogical counseling staff nor the school staff persuaded them to choose a school other than their own choice. This situation was experienced by 7% of parents, which were frequently or very often asked to choose a special school by counseling staff, 13% were advised about integration school and 4% about teaching a child at home (school employees respectively 7%, 15%, 7%) (Fig. 2).

Factors Conducive to Inclusive Education in Polish Primary Schools in the Opinion of Parents

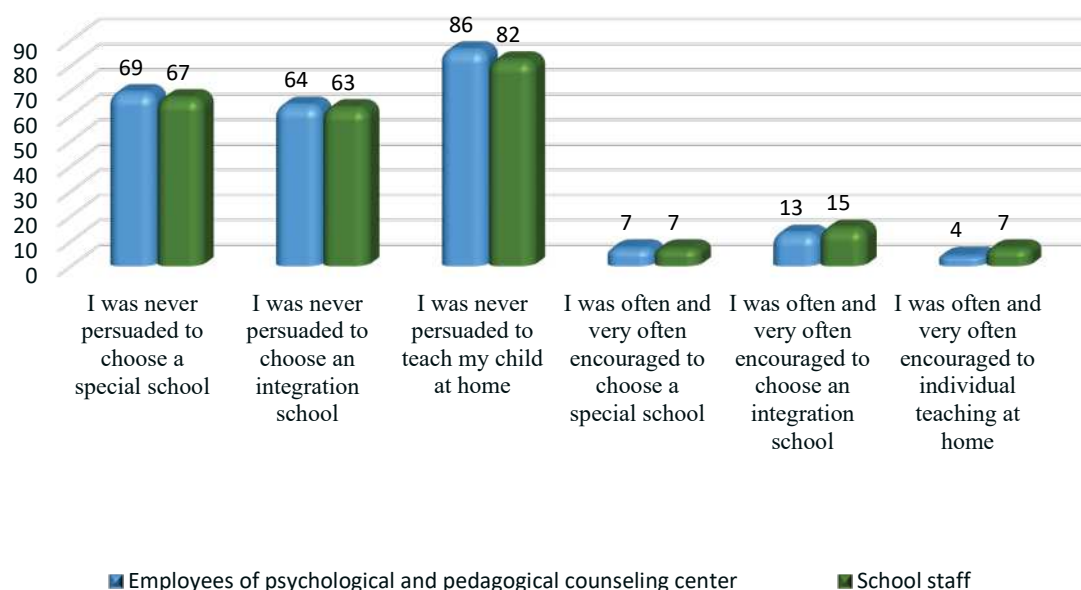


Figure 2 *Frequency of influencing the choices of the child's form of education in the opinion of parents (%)– own studies*

The appropriate qualifications and competences of teachers who are not only specialists in their subject field, but who are also willing to act, understand the idea of inclusion and unconditionally accept their students are the basis for inclusive education and at the same time the condition for its success. Teachers of an inclusive school should have substantive and methodical competences (on how to work with each student), moral competences, as well as be able to reflect on the teaching process and their own actions. This means that teachers should be considered as the main school resource and a factor affecting the quality of education. The pupils' performance largely depends on the competence and style of teachers' work (Barber & Mourshed, 2007). In the conducted study, the assessment of the level of teachers' preparation for working with SEN students was provided by their parents. The obtained results show that in the opinion of 79% of the surveyed, the teachers and specialists employed in schools are rather well prepared to work with pupils with SEN. In the opinion of 77% of the respondents, they also properly adjust the methods and forms of work to the deficits resulting from the disability, diseases or limitations of the children. On the other hand, just over half of parents (54%) indicated that they know the program and goals of revalidation classes for their children.

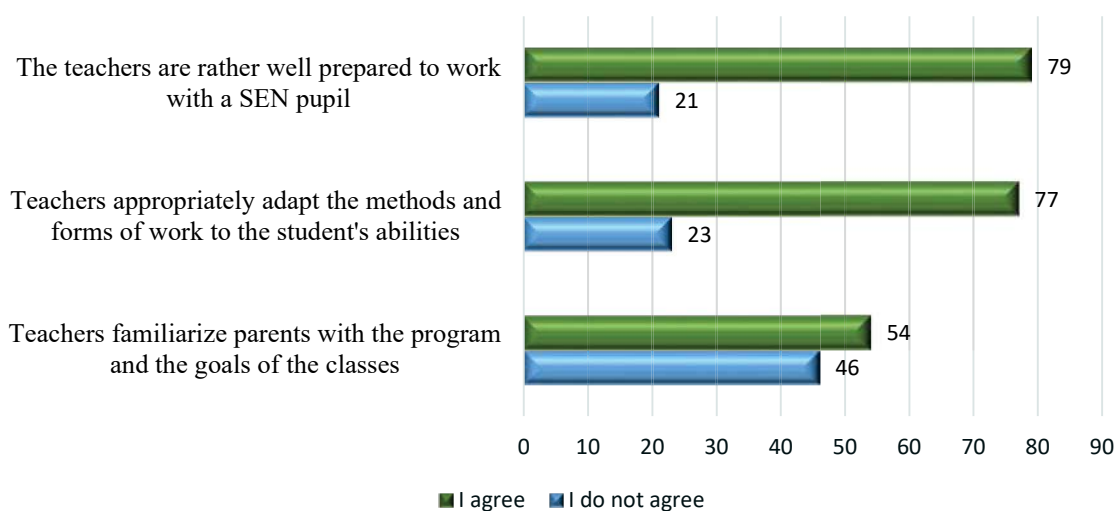


Figure 3 Assessment of teachers' preparation for working with a pupil with SEN (%) – own study

Students with special educational needs are a very diverse group in Polish educational legislation. The individual developmental and educational needs of these students result from: disability, social maladjustment, threat of social maladjustment, specific learning difficulties, language communication disorders, chronic illness, crises or traumatic situations, educational failures, environmental negligence, and are related to the way of spending free time and environmental contacts and adaptation difficulties resulting from cultural differences or with the change of the educational environment, including previous education abroad (Journal of Laws of 2017, item 1591). It is also worth noting that SEN do not have to result solely from deficits, but also from specific talents shown by students. Such a diversity of students' needs and the resulting need to provide appropriate support in their educational environment, in a natural way, forced the need to adapt organizational solutions to the dynamically changing school reality. Therefore, in this study it was important to obtain information from parents on how the school fulfills its tasks in the field of support organization for pupils with SEN. The analysis included such elements of the psychological and pedagogical assistance provided by the school, as: implementation of recommendations for the proper organization of specialized classes, appropriate to the child's needs, selection of classes and their time dimension, support from specialists and adjustment of the school space. Parents were asked to assess the above-mentioned aspects of support provided to their children at school on a 5-point scale. Statements of parents participating in the survey show that specialists employed in schools often implement recommendations contained in the opinions issued to their children by psychological and pedagogical counseling centers on the organization of specialized classes, and their form and time dimension meet the needs of these students. In their opinion, schools employ the average number of

specialists in the field of psychology and special education. However, they had the largest reservations about the school space organization, appropriate to the needs of the student (Fig. 4). In their opinion, children often have the opportunity to safely meet the needs of moving around the school, but only sometimes they are provided with a room for individual classes. They also rarely have access to the "calm-down room".

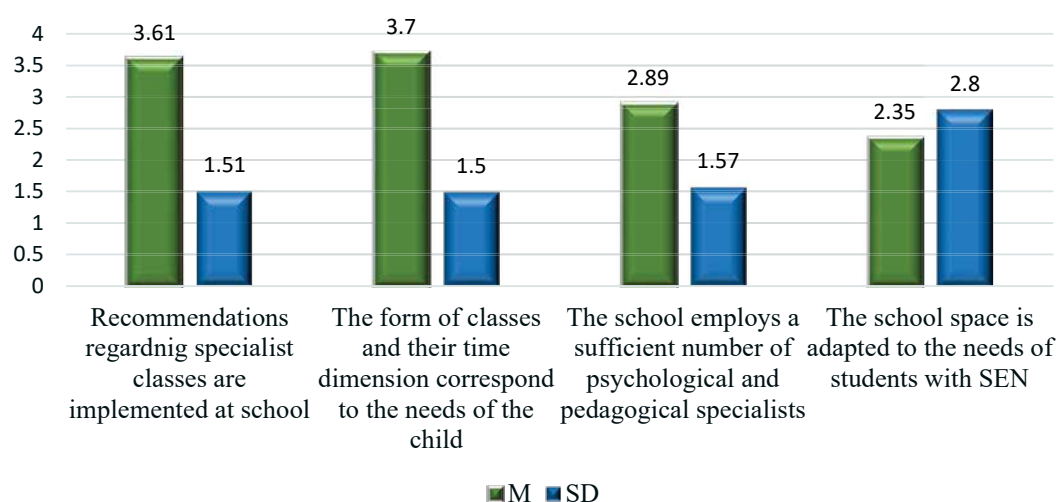


Figure 4 Opinions of parents of SEN pupils on providing them with psychological and pedagogical assistance at schools

Parents of all students have a right to be involved in their child's education and to participate with the school in decisions concerning their child and the school community. It is believed, that parental involvement is an important part of making inclusive education work (Lazarević & Kopas-Vukašinović, 2013; Inclusion BC, 2014). The increasing growth in the participation of parents in creating school reality, in deciding on important school matters, is one of the clearly visible directions of changes that take a place in the Polish educational system. Furthermore, the new quality in the model of psychological and pedagogical assistance is based on the principle that this help should be organized "closer" to the parent. It assumes the treatment of parents as the best specialists for their own child, but it also indicates the necessity of the support to parents in the process of raising an offspring. An attempt to assess the current situation in the scope of parents' participation in decisions concerning their child taken in the school space was one of the objectives of the study. This was to find out how the parents of the SEN students assess cooperation with the school staff in the exchange of information on matters related to children and the possibility of active participation in the planning of forms and scope of help and support for their children. On the basis of information obtained from parents participating in the survey, it was found that parents are rather satisfied with communication with teachers and other specialists employed in the school (respectively: $M = 3.85$ and

SD = 1.19; M = 3.55 and SD = 1.46). Research has shown that 15% of them are not satisfied with the relationship with teachers, and 23% with specialists (e.g. psychologist, pedagogues, others). Recognizing the parents' right to actively participate in planning their child's therapeutic work, their assessment of its implementation was also checked. Parents reported that 69% of them were proposed by teachers and specialists, specific forms of work with their children, which means that most of them want to actively participate in the process of providing them with support at school (Fig. 5).

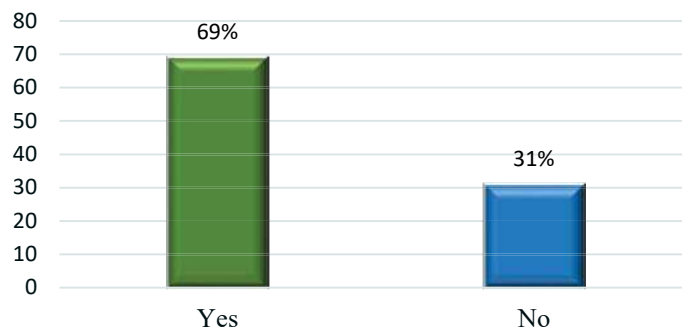


Figure 5 *Have you made any suggestions to teachers or specialists about the form / method of working with the child? (own study)*

It also turns out that parents' suggestions regarding the implementation of recommendations from medical opinions are often taken into account by teachers and other specialists from school (47%). Nevertheless, 53% of respondents admit that their comments in this area are never (17%) or rarely (36%) taken into account by school employees (Fig. 6).

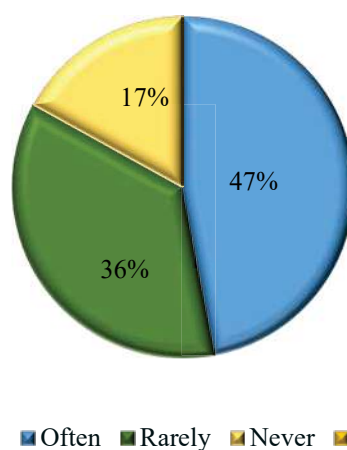


Figure 6 *Were your suggestions taken into account? (own study)*

Conclusions

The representatives of all European countries agree that inclusive education is an important foundation for ensuring equal opportunities in all areas of life for students with different types of special educational needs. It requires the creation of an open and flexible education system that should meet the diverse, often very complex needs of individual students (Al-Khamisy, 2013). The opening of mainstream schools to all students is an arduous process, as the individual students experience various difficulties. In order to meet their needs, as well as the needs of their parents and the broadly understood educational environment, bearing in mind the quality of their education, the Ministry of National Education in recent years introduced a number of changes in law. The main objective is to include these pupils in the peer group and provide them with comprehensive support. Despite many difficulties faced by Polish schools in implementing these assumptions and numerous social and organizational barriers, it should be stated that the situation of SEN pupils in our country is improving every year. As the results of the research presented in this article show, this opinion is also confirmed by those for whom the well-being of children is the highest value - their parents. Their assessment of the school situation of a child with SEN in a public school allows to indicate a number of positive aspects favoring the inclusion of this group of students in the mainstream education.

These include:

- the more and more widespread implementation of a SEN student's right to education in the institution closest to its place of residence, which favors integration not only with its peers in the classroom, but also with the wider local community, and guarantees its parents and itself staying in close family relationship, thanks to eliminating the need to place the child in an institution away from its place of residence,
- respecting the right of parents of SEN pupils to decide on the form of their children's education, recognition of their competence in this area,
- raising the level of teachers' preparation for working with a student in a diverse school classroom,
- increasing parental participation in planning and implementing therapeutic and educational work with a child, as well as creating school reality, in deciding on important school matters. Thanks to this, parents become partners supporting teachers' activities, their allies in the process of upgrading children's potential.

While working on improving the inclusion process, it should be kept in mind that, as Domagała-Zyśk aptly puts it (2012, p. 8), "... no student with difficulties is to adapt to the rules of a public / inclusive school, but the school and the environment have to remove barriers hindering the health, psychological and

social functioning of the pupil with special needs. [...] the school is to function in such a way as to be open to all students and be ready to accept anyone who would like to learn there”.

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