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Citation style: Gajdzica Zenon. (2011). Defining intellectual disability by teachers of mainstream schools as a marker of their competence in special education. "The New Educational Review" (Vol. 23, no. 1 (2011) s. 381-393).



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Defining Intellectual Disability by Teachers of Mainstream Schools as a Marker of their Competence in Special Education

Abstract

The study aims at the presentation and interpretation of the ways of defining disability by teachers from mainstream lower secondary schools. The definitions will be considered from the standpoint of both attitudes and competences and will be interpreted in the context of selected conditions of their constructing. This can become a starting point for a discussion on the whole concept of reforming the system of education for learners with special pedagogical needs in Poland.

The main theses are comprised in the statement that formulating pertinent (from the point of view of educational practice) definitions is associated with both the knowledge about disability, e.g., acquired in the course of university studies, and professional experience gained in contact with disabled learners. This thesis is verified by the research into:

1. the relation between defining and the number of pedagogy classes within the university curriculum (the examined teachers implemented syllabuses of various ranges) and
2. the relation between defining and the experience in teaching learners with mild intellectual disability (only part of the respondents have had previous contact with pupils with mild intellectual retardation).

Key words: *intellectual disability, competences, reform of the education system.*

Introduction

The Polish system of educating intellectually disabled learners is diversified. Its characteristic feature is a multitude of possible educational paths. In practice, each child with a certified need for special education can fulfill school duties in the following forms: mainstream (inclusive) education, institutionalized integration (integrated schools and classes organized in compliance with the current model), segregated education (special schools and classes), and – as the last resort – individual tuition (usually conducted at the learner's home). The decision concerning the form of education is taken by parents. The only exception is the latter possibility as it requires additional certification that there is no possibility to implement classes at school or in a class team. Most frequently, learners with more severe and complex intellectual disabilities attend special schools/classes. Pupils with less severe developmental deficiencies usually fulfill their school duties in mainstream or integrated groups.

In the last two decades a distinct shift has occurred, consisting in a growing number of disabled pupils educated in mainstream or integrated schools (J. Kwapisz, 2006). This is also visible in the reorganization of the whole system of special education. Still in the first half of the 1990s, the editors of *Comparative Studies in Special Education* (K. Mazurek, M.A. Wnzer, 1994) in their global diagnosis of educational systems for disabled learners included Poland in approaching integration, which was a result of easily noticeable transformations in Poland. Current changes are clearly directed towards inclusive education. This is exemplified by the valid legal acts (Serafin, 2009) and the project of the next reform of the educational system for learners with special educational needs (*Uczniowie ze specjalnymi potrzebami edukacyjnymi...*, 2010).

In practice, the success of such a reform is determined by many factors. The major ones are: the attitude to changes and teachers' competences in handling new duties. What becomes a kind of indicator of such an attitude and an element of competence at the same time is the way in which intellectual ability is defined. This thesis will be justified more accurately in the further part of the article.

The presented study aims at the presentation and interpretation of the ways of defining disability by teachers from mainstream lower secondary schools. These definitions will be considered from the standpoint of both attitudes and competences and will be interpreted in the context of selected conditions of their constructing. This can become a starting point for a discussion on the whole concept of reforming the system of education for learners with special pedagogical needs in Poland.

Defining intellectual disability as an indicator of attitudes and an element of pedagogical competences

The term *attitude* is semantically close to the notions of *bias* and *opinion*. However, both these notions refer only to some presentations of attitude. In the case of bias, this refers to the cognitive component and in the case of opinion – to the emotional one. Generally, attitudes are characterized by a complex structure, consisting of three elements. The component usually described as emotional comprises reactions, emotions or feelings related to the object of the attitude (e.g. likes, dislikes). The cognitive element includes the beliefs and thoughts concerning the object of the attitude: quality, quantity, knowledge (truth or falsity). The third behavioural component is associated with the individual's behaviour towards the object of the attitude (quoted in: A. Ceranek-Dadas, E. Neuman-Schmidke, 2005, pp. 745–749). The triple structure of attitude is considered to result from the existence in human consciousness of a bunch of affective (behavioural) predispositions and beliefs concerning the nature of a particular object, which are all closely interrelated (S. Nowak 1973, p. 25).

In the discussed case, the issue of defining disability concerns mostly the cognitive component, which brings it close to the notion of bias. This component comprises the knowledge about the object of the attitude, which is manifested in appropriate or erroneous defining a particular sector of reality. Thus, it can be assumed that the appropriateness of defining intellectual disability in descriptions of the examined teachers is a marker of their bias. Basing definitions on negative features seems to enhance the birth of unfavourable attitudes.

Formulating pertinent (from the point of view of educational practice) definitions should be associated with both the knowledge about disability, e.g., acquired in the course of university studies, and professional experience gained in contact with disabled learners. This thesis is verified by the research into:

1. the relation between defining and the number of pedagogy classes within the university curriculum (the examined teachers implemented syllabuses of various ranges) and
2. the relation between defining and the experience in teaching learners with mild intellectual disability (only part of the respondents have had previous contact with pupils with mild intellectual retardation).

The role of the competence in special education in the whole set of pedagogical competences is a derivative of the discussion on relations between pedagogy and special pedagogy. Leaving aside the discussion of various approaches to competences, for the needs of further disquisition I treat them as the subject's ability and

readiness to perform tasks at the expected level of quality. Competences come into being as a result of integrating the knowledge – a considerable number of smaller abilities and skills of making judgments. They are usually thought to result from the teaching process (quoted in: H. Kwiatkowska, 2008, p. 35). Therefore, teachers' professional competences are a set of professional skills and predispositions which constitute the equipment needed for efficient performance of their job (J. Průcha, E. Walterová, J. Mareš, 2003, p. 104).

Complementary description of teachers' professional competences seems particularly difficult, due to the complexity of functions they perform and the multitude of teaching specializations. Such a description is usually of a selective character (R. Kwaśnica, 1993). That is why, in general, particular standards are attributed to competences. In the case of the competences discussed here, the following standards are focused on:

- praxeological – the efficiency of designing, organizing, implementing, controlling and evaluating educational processes;
- communicative – the skill of linguistic behaviour in educational situations;
- cooperative – the skill of pro-social behaviour and of efficient integration activities;
- creative – innovative and non-standard activity;
- computer – competent use of modern information sources;
- moral – ethicality of undertaken actions (quoted in: K. Denek, 1998).

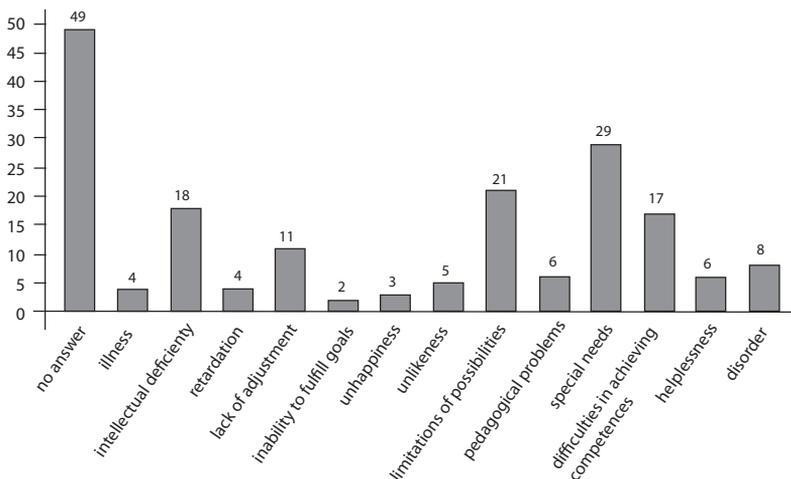
Social, economic and cultural changes necessitate the need for some teacher competences which several years ago were treated marginally or were viewed as unnecessary. This can be exemplified by mainstream school teachers' competences in special education. Not long ago these competences were unnecessary in our country. Nowadays, the popularization of inclusive education has made them compulsory. One of the fundamental components of building such competences is the knowledge about disability, the development of the disabled, or the mechanisms of their socialization. Therefore, also in this context, the appropriateness of defining intellectual disability might be a marker of pedagogical competences. Thus, it can be assumed that appropriate (from the standpoint of the teaching process) definitions of intellectual disability are associated with the feeling of competence in work with a group of intellectually disabled learners. This thesis was also verified in the research.

Perspectives of defining intellectual disability by teachers from mainstream schools in the context of the author’s own studies

The studies comprised 183 teachers from mainstream lower secondary schools (146 women and 37 men). 43 respondents declared teaching humanistic classes, 138 – mathematics and natural sciences, and 2 were early education teachers in the 1st-2nd grades. Among the respondents, 22 had practiced teaching for fewer than 5 years, 81 were in the span between 6 and 15 years, and 15 declared school practice longer than 15 years. In the examined group, the graduates of regular day studies (155 people) dominated over the graduates of extramural part-time studies (28 people). The respondents’ activeness concerning permanent education is imposing. 18 teachers have taken part in three or more courses or postgraduate studies, 70 have completed two training undertakings or educational forms which provide qualifications, 77 declared participation in one of such forms, and only 18 have not earlier undertaken any courses or post-graduate studies. It should be emphasized that in the examined group 12 teachers have special pedagogy qualifications (17 – oligophrenic pedagogy, 1 – surdopedagogy), which they have received in postgraduate courses or studies.

The presented results are part of larger studies on the attitudes of mainstream school teachers to the reform of educational system for learners with special educational needs. Nevertheless, due to the limitations of this paper only the data are presented which refer to the ways of the respondents’ defining intellectual disability.

Figure 1. Key notions in defining intellectual disability (number of indications; n = 183)



The key categories occurring in defining intellectual disability are differentiated (cf. Figure 1). The obtained data should not be surprising in the aspect of different perspectives of defining intellectual disability (mental retardation) in the pedagogical, medical, sociological and psychological literature. What becomes transparent dependently on the applied concept of disability and on the particular focus are: disorders, limitations, special needs, and difficulties in fulfilling social roles.

In defining intellectual disability (mental retardation) Zofia Sękowska mentions three approaches:

- clinical-medical – treating mental retardation as a symptom of an illness, with special attention paid to etiology and pathogenesis;
- practical – of a legal and administrative character;
- psychological – comprising the number and type of criteria according to which the state is judged (Z. Sękowska, 1998, p. 215).

The literature in English offers a different typology of research perspectives concerning mental retardation, which also comprises three suggestions:

- clinical – a medical problem resulting from a biological defect which irreversibly damages structures and functions of the central nervous system;
- developmental – identified with failure (in the development of a person) determined by various biological and social factors;
- social – treating mental retardation in the categories of a socio-cultural fact, acquired through social interactions and evaluated from this perspective (quoted in: T. Żółkowska, 2004, pp. 26–27).

In the aspect of the undertaken subject, the above-mentioned perspectives of defining intellectual disability encourage the analysis of definitions in two major contexts of:

1. emotional marking,
2. the reference to medical, psychological and social components.

Ad 1. Emotional marking in definitions of intellectual disability

A real abundance of approaches to disability (including intellectual one) appears in the social perspective. They are presented in regard to school situation in Table 1.

In most cases, the perspectives presented in the table are negatively marked. Their essence consists of disorders in relationships or in the qualities of functioning in reference to the common model (usually described as inefficient or dysfunctional).

The respondents indicated almost all the perspectives mentioned in the table (Figure 1), although their layout is diversified. Such attitudes are of substantial significance in constructing social disability without association with actual developmental limitations of learners. This approach was appropriately identified and

presented in Gampietro Gobo’s studies (2009). As this author noticed, defining the learner’s disability is related to particular actions undertaken by teachers (e.g.: excessive support, special phrases, exposed sympathy). In practice, these actions strengthen the existing disorders, bring about marginalization, expose separateness, create stigmata, and finally result in constructing the role of the disabled.

Table 1. Viewing disability in the social perspective

Perspective of viewing disability (based on: S. Kowalik, 1998; O. Speck, 2005; C. Barnes, G. Mercer, 2008; S.S. Smith, 2008)	Context of school situation, the teacher’s activities
Minority versus majority	Exposing membership of a group of learners for whom different requirements are applied
Social distance	Creating separateness and other forms of communication
Effect of disturbed adaptation	Disorders in the internalization of common goals and norms
Social insufficiency, powerlessness	Exposing helplessness
Dysfunction	Inability to meet general social demands
Difficulties in learning	Difficulties in fulfilling the general curriculum
Stigma	Exposing disorders and limitations
Role of the disabled	Typical behaviour for the role of the Other, expecting support, lower requirements, exposing helplessness
Result of the integration of many factors	Combination of many factors

A small group of respondents erroneously associates disability with illness, treats it in the categories of unlikeness and problems, or perceives it in the perspective of retardation.

What poses a separate issue is the lack of any definition. A high rate of this category (n=49, which makes 26.7% of all the answers) depicts a low level of knowledge (about the discussed issue) of the teachers from mainstream schools. It should be supposed that most of them were not able to associate intellectual disability with any of the provided expressions. Most probably, during their university studies they did not go through the contents concerning special education or these issues were so insignificant that they did not leave any associations in the respondents’ memory.

Ad 2. References to medical, psychological and social components

Criticism of the medical and social model of disability contributed to the birth of its bio-psycho-social concept. Its foundations may be specified as follows:

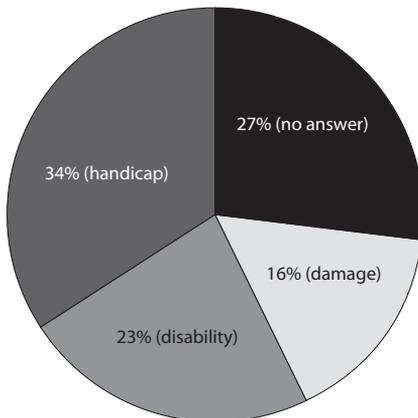
- Man is a biological being. This being consists of the human organism which has a particular structure and which fulfills particular functions.
- Man is a particular person, an individual, who acts and fulfills certain activities and life goals.
- man is also a member of a particular social group and a participant in its life (T. Majewski, 1999, p. 132).

The notion of disability means here a multidimensional phenomenon which is generated in relations of people with their environment. This phenomenon does not categorize people, it only refers to the universal human experience. Therefore, in this approach disability is not an effect of damage or health condition but rather a result of the barriers which the individual faces in life (E. Wapiennik, R. Piotrowicz, 2002, pp. 22–23). Similarly to the individual (biological) model, disability takes place in three dimensions: biological, individual and social. The first refers to the problem of damage, the second – to disability, and the third – to retardation viewed through fulfilling social roles. From the point of view of fulfilling special educational needs, the third component seems the most important. In its area, efficient pedagogical actions are feasible. That is why, referring to social retardation in definitions of intellectual disability should be recognized as more pertinent from the standpoint of educational practice.

The results of the research into definitions in the aspect: damage – disability – retardation are presented in Figure 2.

The analysis of the examined teachers' answers presents considerable differentiation in the discussed field. What ought to be regarded as positive is that the biggest number of respondents (one third) views intellectual disability in social categories. In practice, such an approach strengthens the focus on the issues of social functioning, which is the essence of pedagogical influences. Yet, focusing on developmental deficiencies significantly hinders the positive attitude to fulfilling educational goals. Intellectual disability is an irreversible condition. This means that no rehabilitation activities will substantially increase the intelligence quotient. They can only help in acquiring appropriate habits, or skills and knowledge which greatly improve the learner's functioning after leaving school.

Figure 2. Perspective of defining disability



In compliance with the earlier formulated thesis, the knowledge acquired during university studies should be one of the determinants of defining intellectual disability. It should be reminded here that the respondents are graduates of different university specializations, frequently not related to pedagogy, e.g., the studies in mathematics and natural sciences, implemented at universities and technical university-level schools. Many of them gained pedagogical qualifications by participation in short (270 hours) pedagogical courses, in which the issues of special educations were omitted.

The respondents were classified into three groups. The first comprised the teachers who declared fewer than 300 hours of pedagogy classes. The second group consisted of the teachers who had gone through more than 300 and fewer than 700 hours of pedagogical and psychological training. In practice, they were graduates of teaching specializations preparing for teaching a particular subject. The third group comprised graduates of pedagogical studies who were qualified for teaching a particular subject through permanent education, mainly implemented in the form of postgraduate studies.

Therefore, it can be assumed that the respondents holding degrees in pedagogical studies will view disability in the social perspective more frequently than others. The results of such a study are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Number of pedagogy classes implemented at university and the perspective of defining intellectual disability

		Perspective of defining intellectual disability									
		no answer		damage		disability		retardation		total	
		number of indications	%	number of indications	%	number of indications	%	number of indications	%	number of indications	%
Approximate number of pedagogy classes implemented at university	fewer than 300	19	23.2	12	14.7	23	28.1	28	34.2	82	100
	301–700	24	32.9	15	20.1	15	20.1	19	26.0	73	100
	more than 700	6	21.4	3	10.7	4	14.3	15	53.6	28	100
	Total	49	26.8	30	16.4	42	22.9	62	33.9	183	100

$\chi^2 = 9.749$ (df=6) ni.¹ C= 0.224²

¹ Value 0.05 was applied as the level of significance, which is generally practised in social sciences (cf.: W.P. Zaczyński, 1997, p. 39).

² Apart from value χ^2 I also provide the Pearson correlation coefficient, which describes intensity of the relation within the table (cf.: G.O. Ferguson, Y. Takane, 1997, p. 248.).

The obtained data do not present a statistically significant relation between the considered variables. However, a detailed analysis shows evident tendencies. They are clearly seen in all the distinguished groups. For instance, in the group declaring more than 700 pedagogy classes, over a half defined intellectual disability in the social perspective. Due attention should be paid to the fact that the lowest percentage of lacking answer was also observed in this group.

The next issue to be discussed concerns the relation between the perspective of defining intellectual disability and the professional experience in teaching intellectually disabled learners (Table 3).

Table 3. Contact with the intellectually disabled learner in school practice and the perspective of defining intellectual disability

		Perspective of defining intellectual disability									
		no answer		damage		disability		retardation		total	
		number of indications	%	number of indications	%	number of indications	%	number of indications	%	l. w	%
Professional contact with the intellectually disabled learner	yes	42	31.1	20	14.8	26	19.3	47	34.8	135	100
	no (I am not sure)	7	14.6	10	20.3	16	33.3	15	31.3	48	100
	total	49	26.8	30	16.4	42	22.9	62	33.9	183	100

$\chi^2 = 7.584$ (df=3) ni. C= 0.198

It turns out that over 70% of the teachers from mainstream schools have already had opportunities to educate learners with mild intellectual disability. As the research also shows, such experiences do not determine with statistical significance the ways of defining intellectual disability. However, the tendency indicated earlier seems to be confirmed also in this case. This means that the teachers who have already worked with the disabled learner apply the perspective of social retardation. Generally, in the aspect of the previous study, the results are not surprising. Most probably, the lack of knowledge about the development of disabled learners, their socialization mechanisms or their special educational needs hinder teachers' work so much that pedagogical experiences themselves cannot be assigned to a particular theory. This in turn makes it impossible to explain the processes taking place within the class team and does not determine the cognitive component of the attitude to disabled learners.

Reversing the analyzed relations, it seems useful to find out if the knowledge about disability, expressed in a pertinent definition (from the standpoint of pedagogy), enhances declarations concerning the preparation for work with the discussed group of learners. The results of such research are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Perspective of defining disability and the feeling of being prepared for work with the learner with mild intellectual disability

		Feeling of being prepared for work with the learner with mild intellectual disability							
		good and average		I do not know		no at all		total	
		number of indications	%	number of indications	%	number of indications	%	number of indications	%
Perspective of defining intellectual disability	damage	9	30.0	8	26.7	13	43.3	30	100
	disability	7	16.7	10	23.8	25	59.5	42	100
	retardation	16	25.8	10	16.3	36	58.1	62	100
	no answer	15	30.6	7	14.3	27	55.1	49	100
	total	47	25.7	35	19.1	101	55.2	183	100

$\chi^2 = 5.276$ (df=6) ni. C= 0.167

Analyzing the obtained data makes it easy to notice that over a half of the respondents declare a complete lack of competence to work with intellectually disabled learners. Referring here again to the data which indicated that 70% of the respondents have worked or are working with such learners, this information should be regarded as worrying. The presented data generally show a lack of relation between the feeling of competence and the perspective of defining disability. In the context of such information, two theses might be put forward which might explain the results. The first states that the declaration of being prepared for work with the disabled learner is not always associated with the competences in special pedagogy. The following rule may occur here: if I do not know something, I am not aware of my lack of knowledge. Thus, unfamiliarity with the theories concerning special educational needs of disabled learners does not trigger any consequences for the subjective feeling of one's competence. The second thesis refers to the opinion about the lack of "practical benefits from pedagogical knowledge", which is often presented by teachers of disabled learners at methodology conferences. What is a common belief is the fact that pedagogical theory has drifted apart from school practice so much that its lack does not bring about substantial loss of

practical pedagogical competences. It is hard to agree with this opinion; however, it might have an influence on the investigated relations. Taking this issue into account requires further studies.

Final remarks

The presented research results constitute a comment in the discussion on reforming the system of education for learners with special educational needs in Poland. Obviously, the concept of including disabled learners in the mainstream education is right. Yet, the problem is that the Polish mainstream school is not prepared for large scale inclusion. The most important component of each educational reform consists of the people introducing changes at the level of schools – teachers. This issue involves two intersecting variables. The first refers to the attitude towards the suggested changes, and the second – to actual resources for the implementation of these transformations. In the presented study, both problems occurred, although the issue of attitude appeared contextually as a derivative of competence. Nevertheless, there is still a lot to do in both issues. The most urging problem is providing mainstream school teachers with basic knowledge concerning disabled learners and their needs. Only on the basis of such competences, the confidence in changes should be built, as well as a positive attitude to inclusive education of learners with intellectual disability.

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