

FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION – AN ATTEMPT AT EXPLANATION

Marcin Białas

Akademia Wychowania Fizycznego i Sportu im. Jędrzeja Śniadeckiego in Gdańsk, Poland

Abstract

The article aims to highlight the necessity of implementing inclusive education in schools as a response to the need for building an open society. Its success depends on understanding the essence of this concept. Therefore, the author of the paper points out the most common mistakes that contradict the idea of inclusive education, as well as the foundations for its possible implementation.

Keywords: *inclusive education, philosophical foundations, implementing inclusive education*

PRIMARY OBJECTIVES OF CONTEMPORARY SCHOOLS

The urgent need for reforming contemporary schools presents them with two main objectives. One of them is to provide adequate assistance to students in understanding the increasingly complex realities of unstable life, the so-called new "rules of social, economic, and cultural order." In this regard, schools are obligated to take educational and upbringing actions that will foster mental - inherent change in students being able to adapt in relation to the prevailing ideals and goals worldwide. It is the duty of modern schools to educate a new individual who will be a wise and responsible citizen, leading their life (private, professional) according to their desires, expectations, and capabilities, and enjoying the full rights available to them. They want to live in an open world, free of boundaries and any limitations that could be the basis for their potential exclusion (Szymański 2024).

Therefore, the second significant objective on which modern schools should focus is to educate individuals who are compassionate, sensitive, and capable of acting in solidarity with others, open to the uniqueness of each person, treating these qualities as valuable and distinguishing. It is the responsibility of modern schools to develop a system conducive to overcoming social and educational exclusion, increasing educational opportunities for all students by providing them with conditions to develop their individual potential. Equipping them with knowledge, skills, and social competencies necessary for creating an inclusive society both now and in the future (Bąbka 2014).

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION – AN ATTEMPT AT DEFINITION

It seems that meeting these objectives will only be possible through a change in the way contemporary schools and their mission are viewed, which undoubtedly involves the need for fundamental changes in many areas. These include the need for a change in the perception of students - the subjects of education. Changes in the approach to curricula, as well as teaching methods and styles, also seem necessary, undoubtedly, in connection to the need to improve the quality of the work of teachers - the subjects of establishing a partnership relationship with students (Mielczarek 2022).

In line with these objectives, implementation of inclusive education in comprehensive (mainstream) schools is the response to the need for introducing these changes. It creates conditions for learning (such as: personalised educational requirements, individualisation of teaching methods, a fair assessment system that considers the student's effort and engagement, subjective, partner treatment of students by teachers in the process of performing their educational and upbringing activities), which allow each student - as a full participant in the educational process - to achieve full personal development according to their abilities and full integration into social life (Miłkowska 2005).

It is important to emphasize here that the idea of inclusive education is not a new concept. It is not an experiment whose consequences may be somewhat dangerous. The concept of inclusive education,

although not explicitly, originated many years ago in the minds of renowned educators with a global legacy. For example, R. Steiner (1861-1925), M. Montessori (1870-1952), or J. Korczak (1877-1942) in their scholarly achievements emphasized not only the need to develop the developmental drive in every student without exception but also the need for assistance dedicated to helping each student achieve their full potential in all areas of life. They also pointed out the possibilities of its practical implementation through thoughtful organization of the educational environment, the use of appropriate, diverse, and personalised educational methods and techniques. They also emphasized the significant role of teachers, referred to as "environment creators" - individuals who discovered students' potential. Moreover, they emphasized the need to develop independent thinking in students, satisfied through their acquisition (discovery) of knowledge through action, or the need to shape students in a broad, open environment (peer, classroom, etc.). Therefore, the concept of inclusive education is not a recent discovery but rather appears as an evolutionary set of views crystallized over the years, developed and verified in direct action - that is, in working with students. Currently, the concept of inclusive education requires only or as much as its introduction into educational institutions - schools where it is not yet present. However, for this to happen, the concept and its basic foundations must be clearly understood (Mittler 2000).

SELECTED PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

An essential foundation for building inclusive education is personalism. According to its premises, every student should be treated as the subject and goal of human action. The key aspect of this concept is the definition of "every" implying each and every (without exception) student. It is difficult, therefore, to point out specifically the subjects to whom inclusive education is dedicated. This incomplete spectrum may include, for example, students having difficulties in school, average students, highly gifted students, students with school phobia, students with depression, immigrant students, students with visual, motor, auditory, intellectual disabilities, and others - in short, every student. They all have specific educational needs that inclusive education aims to meet. Thus, the answer to the question of who is a student - the subject of inclusive education, built on the basis of personalism, primarily contains the thesis that they are individuals worthy of affirmation and care (Bartnik 2008). Their dignity should be a sufficient motive for educators to create appropriate conditions for their development, upbringing, and education. Inclusive education containing the ideas of personalism is focused on recognizing a special kind of value in each student, treating them in a personalized manner as unique, valuable individuals. Such an approach in pedagogical practice imposes on educators the duty of affirmation beyond the objective and consumeristic treatment of each student. Furthermore, it imposes on the school the obligation to foster openness towards others, emphasize the importance of interpersonal relationships, underline coexistence and cooperation now and in the future, and establish solidarity between the "I and You" (Leszczynski 2021).

Therefore, a prerequisite for the successful implantation of the idea of inclusive education in schools is the need to change the perception of each student. Often, their previous perception has built a belief that they are inferior to others due to their shortcomings and limitations. In this matter, the change in the perception is proposed by the philosophy of the human person, rooted in a broader anthropological and ethical context. In this comprehensive approach, an attempt is made to explain the issues of individuals in their deepest aspects (Krakowiak 2023).

Taking the above into account, the achievements of the philosophy of the human person, which uses metaphysical determinations concerning the structure of human existence, demonstrate that apart from integrating and perfectionist elements of human nature, it also consists of essential elements. It includes elements such as creations, beings, forms, and matter, which together constitute each human being, regardless of their deficiencies and limitations. Based on these metaphysical determinations, one cannot speak of the ontological deficiency of a human being on the grounds of realistic ontology. Metaphysics does not perceive such deficiency in the constituent parts of human existence. Hence, a student facing difficulties in school, an average student, a highly gifted student, a student with school phobia, a student with depression, an immigrant student, a student with visual, motor, auditory disabilities, and others, according to metaphysical determinations concerning the constituent parts of human existence, is perceived like any other human being, composed of the same essential parts. Thus, this provides

justification for the need for equal treatment of each individual. In terms of metaphysical principles, considering the presence of essential elements in the structure of personal being, differences among individuals cannot be identified. These metaphysical determinations appear to be crucial for changing the teachers' perception of students in inclusive education. In this case, the category of "inferior" in the sense of a "lesser student" lacks any justification (Białas 2019).

In relation to the above determinations, an analysis of phenomenological principles contributing to a proper understanding of inclusive education also seems interesting. This philosophical way of thinking, focusing on the phenomenon of deficiency, indicates the "deficiencies" of individuals, which, considering the examples of students mentioned earlier, may relate to issues such as difficulty in acquiring knowledge, reluctance to gain knowledge, lack of knowledge of ways to explore knowledge in its broader, scientific dimension, fear of school, symptoms of illness, cultural differences, inability to move freely, loss of sight or hearing, or intellectual limitations, etc. All these shortcomings, mentioned as examples, only demonstrate the inherent deficiency that is a characteristic of every human being, forming the basis of the uniqueness of each human being.

Based on these metaphysical and phenomenological determinations, it is evident that deficiency does not reach the essence of the personal human being - the dimension that determines their personal dignity. Therefore, regardless of whether an individual is burdened with one or another "deficiency," according to metaphysical principles regarding the constituent parts of human existence, they are perceived like any other human being, composed of the same essential parts. Consequently, regardless of a person's "deficiencies," understood here as specific educational difficulties, there is a need for equal and personalized educational approach (Białas 2020).

MOST COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS REGARDING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Misunderstandings concerning inclusive education are one of the manifestations of difficulties in its widespread implementation in comprehensive schools. They mainly stem from erroneously accepted assumptions that still divide society into "better" and "worse" individuals. The latter, with visible deviations from the norm or "deficiencies," according to commonly circulated views, live and are supposed to live in hiding. They are often placed in closed special educational centres built frequently on the outskirts of cities, isolated from their families and local community environments. Unfortunately, it seems that people have learned to live in a world divided into elites and marginalized groups (Krakowiak 2023).

Among the reasons for misunderstandings regarding inclusive education, there are also hidden emotional factors related to adopting attitudes towards individuals with so-called "deficiencies." The fear of otherness, illnesses, and suffering can easily be eliminated from daily life by delegating professionals to deal with individuals experiencing these problems. This explains the determination of activists who aim to protect schools from the presence of individuals who are "unpleasant to look at," evoke fear, and sometimes disgust. Therefore, it seems that the combination of fear of inclusive education for individuals with special educational needs serves as a strong motivation for many educators and educational decision-makers to oppose and protest, contributing to the inhibition of the process of creating schools with inclusive teaching (Białas 2020).

Inclusive education also raises concerns among individuals attached to the idea of elite exclusion. They adopt a simplified assumption that the presence of "weaker," "less capable," "deficient" individuals in student groups reduces academic standards and contributes to a decrease in the overall level of education for everyone (the so-called "levelling down"). Unfortunately, elite exclusion, characteristic of social Darwinism, in such cases results in social exclusion not only of the weakest individuals but also of the most creative ones who were not offered appropriate educational support (Krakowiak 2023).

Another misconception in inclusive education is the need for students to participate in so-called "rat races." This idea stems from an internalized ideological order contained in the "biological" perception of students as individuals with "deficiencies," which is associated with the need to compensate for these "deficiencies," make up for them, or supplement their knowledge based on the dramatic tension between

the concept of good attributed to educational corrective actions and the evil of neglect. The influence of this moral schema is so powerful that it does not allow the recognition of facts that clearly indicate that not all well-intentioned actions yield the expected results. Therefore, in the adopted "biological" model of perceiving students, teachers become efficient and demanding technicians. Equipped with methodical skills and teaching techniques, supported by technical and electronic learning aids, they carry out their educational tasks by assuming a directive, managerial role, becoming "authorities" with privileged voices. The "rat race" in which students with "deficiencies" participate is not an easy task. Only a small group of capable students successfully navigate through its educational stages independently. The rest invest significant effort and engagement (beyond school hours) in additional educational corrective actions (extra lessons lasting often until late at night), resulting in a continuous experience of failure, doubting their intellectual abilities, becoming frustrated, exhausted individuals who derive no pleasure from performing intellectual school tasks (Białas 2018).

ESTABLISHING SCHOOLS WITH INCLUSIVE TEACHING

Considering the above conclusions, inclusive teaching should be perceived as a concept that involves creating an educational environment in conditions of mainstream state schools accessible to every student. The creation of such an educational environment, which would cater to both the individual needs and abilities of each student, regardless of their specific educational difficulties or "deficiencies," is intended to be a flexible teaching system based on a personalized educational approach. It should provide students with not only teacher-directed work conditions but also an education that allows for independent action and experience essential for acquiring knowledge, skills, and social competencies. In this regard, the actions taken by the teaching staff should be limited to providing students with space for learning using self-regulation and self-determination. By organizing thought processes and employing educational strategies conducive to learning both in individual conditions and through group work (Колупаева, Савчук 2010).

Therefore, when analysing the possibility of promoting quality in inclusive education, several key factors should be emphasized:

- One of them is the inclusion of students in the education system, which should encompass a wide range of students, reflecting a cross-section of society. As a result, this type of action aims to reduce the risk of exclusion due to the loss of access to educational services, thereby preventing the loss of educational opportunities. On the other hand, it aims to contribute to full social integration, both now and in the future.
- Another factor is the active involvement of all students in the didactic process, involving the allocation of tasks that are understandable, feasible, considerate of the level of difficulty, tailored to students' abilities, interesting, allowing for creative demonstration, necessary and valuable - constituting the whole project. It should also be noted that a priority here is to develop students' ability to acquire new skills (not just mastering a specific segment of subject knowledge). Developing a personalized approach to the learning process, where each student, supported by the teacher, sets specific educational goals, creates a suitable compilation, regularly reviews them, and develops an individual learning path with the help of others.
- Another of the identified factors determining the success of inclusive education is learning how to cooperate. In this respect, teachers are expected to develop a collaborative action system that engages all students, who should help and support each other. Assuming the roles of "teachers" who teach others and thus solidify their knowledge while gaining didactic competencies and "students" who, when taught by their peers, better absorb knowledge. By assisting each other in a flexible and well-thought-out division into appropriately "internally diverse" groups. This individualized approach to the needs of each student during educational tasks considers the diversity of their abilities and needs. However, this approach requires setting well-structured goals, using alternative paths of education, maintaining flexibility in the teaching process, and allowing for different variations of grouping students.

- The last factor determining the effectiveness of implementing inclusive education concerns the student assessment system. In this case, it must be a system that supports the learning process of each student, does not stigmatize them, and does not lead to negative consequences. In inclusive education, assessment should consider a holistic perspective on measuring students' progress; this perspective takes into account the mastery of content and the behavioural, social, and emotional aspects of the learning process, clearly defining the next steps. Consequently, students, regardless of their limitations and educational problems, achieve educational successes based on their personal abilities, which are recognised, rewarded - properly assessed, considering the student's effort and engagement in it (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education 2009).

REFLECTION INSTEAD OF CONCLUSION

Inclusive education is an indispensable concept for building an inclusive society. Its principles focus not only on endowing every student with a specific, personalized attention that will result in their development but also on internalizing the idea of tolerance and openness towards others in every student. The litmus test for inclusive education is an open society built on individuals who appreciate each other, can learn and work together, coexist, and cooperate - live.

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