

Implementation of the Principles of the Paradigm of Equal Educational Opportunities in the Assessment of Students with Disabilities

Key words: higher education of persons with disabilities, disabled students, the paradigm of higher education based on equal chances

Abstract

In the context of the continuously increasing interest of young people with disabilities in pursuing higher education, it is important to learn about their experiences and to monitor their opinions on the process of higher. The presented considerations and the research results aim at explaining the approach called a paradigm of equal educational opportunities in higher education as well as at learning what is the opinion of students with disabilities on how or to what extent the principles of the paradigm are currently implemented.

Introduction

For over a dozen years, the interest of young people with disabilities in gaining higher education has been dynamically increasing in Poland. The Central Statistical Office began registering students with disabilities only at the end of the 1990s. Previously, participation of people with disabilities in higher education had an incidental character – individual persons were scattered over various universities. The first record of the size and structure of the population of students with disabilities concerned the academic year 1998/1999. At that time, a total number of 1146 young people with adjudicated disabilities studied in Poland. After only twelve years, it was recorded in the *Concise Statistical Yearbook of Poland 2012* that in the academic year 2010/2011, 30 096 persons with disabilities were acquiring higher education at the Polish universities. It can be thus stated that the current population of students with disabilities who are obtaining higher education is 26 times higher than in the academic year 1998/1999. This is obviously a positive phenomenon since attending a university provides the opportunity for achieving an intrapsychic integration

(cf. Krause), living in a community with other people, becoming bolder in formulating one's goals and consistently struggling to achieve them, developing interests and skills, and finally – satisfying the desire for autonomy and independence – the opportunity for “becoming the master of one's fate”.

The rapid growth of the number of people with disabilities who aim at getting a higher education provokes, among other things, an observation on how the population is perceived and treated in the university environment. Even more interesting seems to be the issue of how students with disabilities feel to be perceived and treated by their educators and fellow students. Reflections and the findings of the research presented in this article approach this issue.

The paradigm of equal educational opportunities in higher education – the genesis and characteristics

In the light of the dynamic growth of interest in higher education that is manifested by young disabled people, changing the philosophy of education was absolutely necessary. There was a need to shape a new paradigm of education. On the basis of my research (Cierpiałowska, 2009), a solution which I refer to as **the paradigm of equal opportunities in higher education** can be proposed. This paradigm does not introduce solutions that grant disabled students a privileged status. Its aim is to create conditions adequate to their needs – so-called *special educational needs* – in which disabled students will be given the opportunity to obtain higher education on equal terms as their able-bodied colleagues (cf. Stochmiałek, 2001; Podgórska-Jachnik, 2002 et al.). We should agree with the opinion of Wojciechowski (2003, p. 381) who stated that “treating the disabled as other individuals (using neutral policies or practices) might as well be a subtle form of discrimination”.

The assumption that underlies the basis of formulating the principles of the paradigm of equal opportunities in higher education is the belief that a simplified image of the problems of disabled students is widespread in the academic environment.

Five principles have been distinguished: the principle of subjectivity, the principle of dialogue, the principle of support, the principle of integration and full participation, the principle of individual and flexible attitude. These principles are not new, yet, in the context of the subject of young persons with disabilities attempting to complete higher education, they gain a different and specific meaning. A precise characteristic of all of the above mentioned

principles was presented in another work. This article provides only a short presentation of the distinguished principles of the paradigm of **equal opportunities in higher education**.

The first of the principles that is the starting point and the foundation for all other principles is the **principle of subjectivity**. Its key assumption is the recognition of every person as a unique individual with all his weak and strong points, who has the right to personal fulfillment and integration with other people. According to that principle, the right to decide about oneself and one's life is respected. It is essential to create conditions for the sense of the inner causative power, affecting one's own situation by making conscious decisions, authentic participation in the creation of one's own life. A significant element of the principle of subjectivity is supporting the cultivation of the proper self-esteem among students, helping them in their personal creation and expression, and supporting their struggle against external obstructions and their own limitations. Following the rule of subjectivity involves rejecting by the able-bodied members of the society the belief that persons with specific dysfunctions are *useless* for practicing particular professions, which in most cases stems from stereotypes and the lack of knowledge (Kosakowski, 2003; Ossowski, 2003). The value following from respecting the principle of subjectivity is that students with disabilities accept shared responsibility for the effects of their own education.

The **principle of dialogue** amounts to a few fundamental issues. First of all – the process of tertiary education should always involve a dialogue understood as a mutual exchange of thoughts between lecturers and students. This situation creates opportunities for the development based on the exchange and acquisition of knowledge and on learning about each other's system of values. The approach to students with disabilities based on dialogue forms the feeling of responsibility not only for themselves, but also for their dialogue partners – it teaches them maturity. The dialogue may take place when there is a proper atmosphere of trust, kindness, respect and mutual recognition of personal dignity, respect for the freedom of the dialogue partners. Therefore, dialogue is an interaction of free persons based on trust and mutual kindness (Matulka, 1994). Secondly – a characteristic form of dialogue or discourse in the process of the academic education is evaluation (Paławska, 2004). It leads to getting rid of the tendency to decide for people with disabilities and to help them on the basis of one's own idea. While reflecting on the dialogue in the process of the academic education of students with disabilities one cannot ignore the

objective difficulties arising from the existence of the so-called *educational barrier*; which hinder the technical realization of the dialogue. Overcoming these difficulties requires patience and good will of both sides of the dialogue. The key issue here is mutual understanding of the difficulties and genuine willingness to communicate.

Another principle which has very important practical implications is the **principle of support**. Students with disabilities need support, which, according to Sowa and Wojciechowski (2001, p. 35), might be understood as a type of interaction in a dynamic relation between the supporting person and the supported person, which aims at solving the problem of a person with disability or overcoming a difficult situation.

It seems that the support of students with disabilities should be carried out in three directions:

- support directed at a student with disability;
- activities directed at the social environment;
- activities aimed at removing the obstacles in the physical environment.

The above approach is similar to Ossowski's (2003, p. 41) point of view according to which "an effective support of persons with disabilities in the process of releasing them from constraints should be carried out through treatment and rehabilitation as well as through creating a world without barriers – **everybody, independently, unassisted** (highlighted by the Author)".

The first area of activities, namely the direct support of a student with disability, should encompass the following types of activities:

- emotional support based on empathy and trust;
- instrumental support involving helpful behaviours that directly address the needs of a given person, or, in other words, concrete help in solving stressful problems and overcoming crises;
- informative support based on conveying knowledge of the strategies for coping with personal and environmental problems;
- support through conveying information beneficial for the self-esteem of the supported persons, which provides them with the feeling of being a valuable subject surrounded by kind interest (Ostrowska et al., 2001).

In this regard, the support should be treated either as helping an individual in his self-development or as a type of counselling which shapes life competencies that would enable young people with disabilities to lead independent lives, enjoy personal freedom and be maximally independent from others.

What seems to be particularly important with regard to disabled students is the area of support directly connected with acquiring the knowledge and caring for the *special educational needs*. Thus, it is crucial to organize specialized professional services that would make education opportunities equal (that is, would enable achieving educational aims in their broad understanding, through creating a situation adequate to the needs and capabilities of individual students).

Another important aspect of supporting students with disabilities is providing the economic support, since disability usually generates a need to incur additional costs. Students with disabilities are able to use certain funds, yet – as practice shows – these solutions are of temporary rather than systematic character and certainly do not fully meet the vast needs of students.

If supporting disabled students was treated as a specific type of crisis intervention, then, if analysed vertically, the support should be implemented at three levels:

- initial prevention, for instance, informative campaigns addressed to potential candidates for studies, organizing the so-called alternative course of entrance examinations, assistance in adapting to the regulations of studies in the institutions of higher education;
- secondary prevention, which constitutes a multi-faceted, specific help in difficult situations during studies;
- third level prevention – support aimed at sustaining the achieved effects, also assistance in looking for a job after graduation (cf. Sęk, 1993).

The second area of the support of disabled students should involve activities aimed at the social environment. Their main goal is to remove psychological constraints and reshape the social attitudes. These would be the activities that support disabled students in an indirect way. One form of such support could be by bringing up the subject of disabilities in media in a skilful way, devoid of sensational approach and mercy, but rather based on conveying reliable knowledge of the needs and capabilities of persons with disabilities (cf. Ossowski, 2003).

The third area of activities – also of indirect nature – will include all types of activities focused on removing external obstacles, specifically the ones related to the physical environment. It is particularly important to adapt universities in terms of the technical infrastructure, by means of providing spatially adapted computer desks, installing systems facilitating hearing, etc.

Nowadays, the majority of higher education institutions in Poland employ the so-called Dean's Proxies for Persons with Disabilities. In many others there are the Offices for Persons with Disabilities which are basically entire teams of employees who help disabled students. Thanks to their functioning, the situation of persons with disabilities studying at Polish universities is gradually improving.

The principle of integration (inclusion) and full participation in short boils down to the aspiration for *in-psyche integration*. The intrapsychic dimension of the integration is the readiness of both sides for the conscious participation in the integration process, the inner conviction about legitimacy of its idea, readiness to accept all, not only selected situations that might happen during its course; the in-psyche integration often requires changes in the hierarchy of values, a change of attitudes, increasing toleration and readiness for compromise; finally, the acceptance of the difference. The lack of the in-psyche integration means superficiality of contacts and distance (Krause, 2004). According to this principle, in the era of informatization and domination of the media, it is important not to overvalue the role of remote education, since the live education process towers over education led by means of the media. This principle also implies the importance of encouraging students with disabilities to attending full-time studies because it gives them an opportunity to establish closer, real and permanent relationships – an opportunity for real inclusion.

The principle of individual and flexible approach is based on the assumption that every person with disability has an individual countenance (Kosakowski, 2003), therefore it is necessary to recognize this individuality in the measure of the possessed potential as well as experienced limitations, and further an individual approach to the specific person. As part of this principle, it is essential to individualize the education process, i.e. adjust the contents, methods, means, time and pace of work and tasks to individual students, their intellectual level, skills, aspirations and health. To make it possible, it is often necessary to break the schemes currently in force and go beyond the rather rigid programmatic, methodical and organizational rigors and sometimes even reinterpret the educational purposes and implement individual education strategies.

Methodological basis of the research

The study presented in this article refers to the research that I carried out in the years 2002–2004. The cognitive purpose of those studies was to diagnose and describe the functioning of students with disabilities in terms of their motives for taking up study, selected areas of educational and psychosocial functioning as well as aspirations of the respondents in relation to the prospects of employment. Results of this study allowed for the realization of a utilitarian/practical goal, i.e. the formulation of the paradigm of equal educational opportunities in the higher education as well as definition of the principles of this paradigm. After ten years, it is interesting to learn about the current opinions of students with disabilities on the subject of how or to what extent the principles of the paradigm are presently implemented. And this is the purpose of the research presented in this article.

The research was carried out in the so-called mixed strategy. In the first stage open interviews of thematic and individual character were carried out with a group of twelve deliberately chosen students with disabilities. The interviews were carried out with students with different types and degrees of disability, half of the inquired group were women. The research issues that I wanted to explore considered the way in which students with disabilities operationalize and comprehend the individual principles of the paradigm of equal educational opportunities as well as what are their individual experiences in this field. Analysis of the conducted interviews allowed for preparing a questionnaire, which was used in the second stage to carry out a diagnostic survey among 120 current students with disabilities. The subjects were students of various universities in Krakow. They were persons chosen due the type and degree of disability as well as their sex. The research issue considered the way of evaluating the implementation of principles of the paradigm of equal educational opportunities in the higher education.

Results of the survey

When evaluating the implementation of the principle of subjectivity, more than half of the inquired students (54%) assessed it as *rather positive* and almost one-fifth of them as *definitely positive*. Almost the same number of respondents (20%) had difficulty in assessing the implementation of this principle; 7% of the inquired students evaluated the implementation of the

subjectivity principle *negatively*, including 2% who evaluated it as *strongly negative*.

Implementation of the dialogue principle was evaluated as *rather positive* by 41% of the students and as *definitely positive* by 17% of the inquired. 18% of the respondents rated the implementation of this principle negatively based on their own experience including 14% of respondents who rated it as *rather negative* and 4% as *strongly negative*. More than one third of the inquired (36%) had difficulties with assessing the implementation of the principle of dialogue to which they gave expression by choosing the option *it is hard to say*. This could be evidence of having both positive and negative experiences in this regard.

When evaluating the implementation of the individual and flexible approach, almost one third of respondents were persons who had *rather positive* experiences in this aspect and 11% were those with *strongly positive* experiences. Unfortunately, one-fifth of the inquired students (20%) assessed the implementation of this rule *rather negatively* and almost every tenth person (9%) spoke about the implementation of the principle in a *decidedly negative way*. Altogether, 29% of the inquired persons were dissatisfied with the way how the principle of the individual and flexible approach to a student with special educational needs is being implemented at universities as well as with flexibility that is offered them. Almost the same number of persons had difficulties with evaluating this principle in the process of higher education at universities.

However, students with disabilities highly assessed the implementation of the principle of integration and full participation. Not less than 72% of the respondents assessed it as *rather positive* and 23% as *decidedly positive*, which altogether gives 95% of students satisfied with the integration experienced in the widely understood process of the higher education. Only 2% of the inquired persons pointed that they were *rather dissatisfied* in this aspect and there was no *decidedly dissatisfied* respondent. Only 3% of respondents did not clearly assess this aspect by choosing the *it's hard to say* category.

Slightly lower, but still very positively, disabled students assessed the support they received. The *decidedly positive* note was given by 37% of respondents; while more than half of them (52%) assessed the implementation of this principle as *rather positive*. Only one tenth of the respondents had a difficulty in making the assessment in this regard. None of the inquired students assessed the implementation of the principle of support as *decidedly negative* while only 1% of them found it *rather negative*.

Summary and conclusions

The presented results of the research proved that the situation of young people with disabilities studying at universities has – as compared to the situation ten years ago – improved significantly and is now assessed by the inquired students in a rather positive way. After the time when the presence of persons with disabilities within the walls of universities was of innovative character, they permanently inscribed themselves in the landscape of higher education.

In the time of the transition, (cf. Krause, 2004) mechanisms typical for *innovative situations* worked (Ratajczak, 1980). On one hand, the increased interest of young people with disabilities in higher education was treated as a portent of the change to better, while the benefits were seen not only for the functioning of persons with disabilities who took up studies. Potential benefits were also pointed out considering the whole university environment (including lecturers and students without disabilities) as well as the entire community of people with disabilities, since they started believing that in spite of their disability, they can set their own ambitious goals and strive for self-realization. It was also believed that thanks to more numerous presences of young people with disabilities in higher education all disabled members of the society would start being perceived as rightful members. That was the focus of *the great proponents* (cf. Ratajczak, 1980) of the higher education process and integration of people with disabilities. On the other hand, words of more or less *moderate critics* were audible (cf. Ratajczak, 1980). They were afraid whether people with disabilities would make the right choices and whether they would meet the requirements that universities impose their students. Some were also concerned whether the universities would be able to see the special educational needs of young people with disabilities and flexibly adjust to them, so that it would not be at the cost of the quality of education on one hand and at the level of knowledge acquired by persons with disabilities on the other. Since all individual entities of the university environment (lecturers, non-disabled students, administrative staff) had to accept a growing number of students with disabilities, as there is no and should not be any alternative to this trend, actions for the new *clientele* were initiated. The key was for rectors of universities to begin appointing proxies for the students with disabilities. Very important and positive role was played here also by the Offices for Disabled Students (ODS). They had a special power of influence because

principally students with disabilities activated themselves in their ranks. This had led to a situation in which the able-bodied people started looking upon this environment in a more realistic way and not – as before – judging on the basis of assumptions and stereotypes.

However, the presented results show that people with disabilities currently studying at universities are much more satisfied with the implementation of the principle of integration and full participation as well as the principle of support. They also prove quite high satisfaction with the implementation of the principle of support. To a wide extent they are also satisfied with the implementation of the principles of subjectivity, dialogue and the individual approach. Nevertheless, further actions serving the promotion of the idea and the creation of conditions that would allow students with disabilities to acquire higher education should never be abandoned.

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