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Didactic Tasks as a Factor of Including Students with Mild Intellectual Disability into the Mainstream of Lesson Work in a General Access School

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WSKAŹNIK WŁĄCZANIA UCZNIĄ Z LEKKĄ
NIEPEŁOSPRAWNOŚCIĄ INTELEKTUALNĄ
W GŁÓWNY NURT PRACY LEKCYJNEJ W SZKOLE
OGÓLNODOSTĘPNEJ

Keywords:
mainstream of lesson
work, student with
mild intellectual
disability, questions
and orders

Summary: The mainstream category is a constitutive element of the traditionally understood inclusive education (the one based on the reconstruction of special needs education). Most authors of definitions formulated in the early stages of the development of inclusive education theory refer to this category. The presence of a student with (intellectual) disability in the mainstream of lesson work may be viewed in physical, social and cognitive terms. The indicators of the last one are, among others, the ability to provide answers to questions and follow instructions directed to all the students in the class. The aim of this study is to present results of research regarding this issue. While accumulating the data, the questionnaire technique was used, addressed to teachers of general access classes working

with students with mild intellectual disability. The presented results are a part of a wider research project concerning the educational situation of this group of students in general access school. The study was conducted in three phases (in years: 2004, 2009, 2014) on the group of 450 teachers (150 teachers in each instalment).

Słowa kluczowe:
główny nurt pracy
lekcyjnej, uczeń z lek-
ką niepełnospraw-
nością intelektualną,
pytania i polecenia

Streszczenie: Kategoria głównego nurtu stanowi element konstytutywny tradycyjnie pojmowanej edukacji inkluzyjnej (czyli tej konstruowanej na kanwie rekonstrukcji edukacji specjalnej). Większość autorów definicji sformułowanych we wczesnych fazach rozwoju teorii kształcenia inkluzyjnego odwołuje się do tej kategorii. Obecność ucznia z niepełnosprawnością (intelektualną) w głównym nurcie pracy lekcyjnej można rozpatrywać w perspektywie fizycznej, społecznej oraz poznawczej. Wskaźnikiem tej ostatniej są m.in. umiejętności udzielania odpowiedzi na pytania oraz wykonywania poleceń kierowanych do wszystkich uczniów w klasie. Celem opracowania jest prezentacja wyników badań dotyczących tego zagadnienia. W zbieraniu danych posłużono się techniką ankiety skierowaną do nauczycieli klas ogólnodostępnych pracujących z uczniem z lekką niepełnosprawnością intelektualną. Prezentowane wyniki są fragmentem szerszego projektu badawczego nad sytuacją edukacyjną tej grupy uczniów w szkole ogólnodostępnej. Badanie przeprowadzono w trzech falach (w latach: 2004, 2009, 2014) na grupie 450 nauczycieli (odpowiednio po 150 w każdej transzy).

Introduction

The mainstream category is a constitutive element of a traditionally understood inclusive education, which means one based on the reconstruction of special needs education (Friend, 2011; Gajdzica, 2018). Most authors of definitions formulated in the early stages of the development of inclusive education theory refer to this category. It is often referred to in the aspect of implementation of the main organisational goal identified with the inclusion of students from disadvantaged groups into the mainstream education

(Reynolds & Flechter-Janzen, 2002, p. 495; Szumski, 2010; Göransson & Nilholm, 2014, pp. 261–270). Despite a certain devaluation of this category in the concepts of inclusive education constituted on the basis of the deconstruction of special education, the mainstream remains the point of reference of methodical lesson work organization in the general access class (Thomas & Loxley, 2007).

Therefore, it is worthwhile to try to consider and determine indicators useful in an empirical review of the mainstream categories, which is the goal of the first part of this text. In the second part, I would like to present the results of a longitudinal study on the declarations of teachers regarding the understanding of questions and ability to follow instructions by students with mild intellectual disability in the general access class. I treat this as one of the indicators of the participation of a student with disability in mainstream education.

The notion of mainstream education

Even though this notion is commonly used in pedagogical or sociological treatises, its definition is nowhere to be found in Polish dictionaries and pedagogical encyclopaedias.

The notion of mainstream in the English language sources usually refers to the least restrictive environment or community (Reynolds & Flechter-Janzen, 2002, p. 604; Richardson & Powell, 2011, p. 246). In social terms, taking into account its local nature, it also happens to be referred to as neighborhood inclusion (Depoy & Gilson, 2011, p. 246). With reference to school education, it is related to the right to education in a general access school, following the common curricula, taking into account special support – in full inclusion (Reynolds & Flechter-Janzen, 2002, p. 604). Accordingly, it happens to be regarded as a notion synonymous to inclusion.

The notion of mainstream education is sometimes understood in two ways. Its first meaning is the trend of general access education followed in common school (regular classes), accessible to all the students. In its other – methodological – meaning, it is the mainstream of activities during a lesson (which may also be referred to as overriding the complementary elements). Most commonly, a majority of students participate in it, as opposed to complementary elements related to taking into account the uncommon needs satisfied individually or in a smaller group. In the mainstream of the lesson, the realized goals are designated by a common curriculum using “usual” didactic means. For the

complementary elements, the aims and the curriculum might be modified (or a special curriculum is applied), and their implementation also requires the application of special means and methods.

In the concept of the mainstream lesson, a certain kind of ontological contradiction appears.¹ Its subject matter is a specialist support (treated as an immanent element of inclusive education). It usually requires the modification of common actions, therefore also individualization. This, in turn, leads to the exclusion from the mainstream. Education in the mainstream of the lesson means, then, the resignation from special (unique) support – which is one of the significant elements of inclusion perceived in the praxeological perspective (effectiveness of implementation of educational goals). Practically, this resignation might mean ignoring the special path of satisfying the needs of a student with disability. The contradiction indicated above may be removed in two ways – and both of them fit into the widely understood concept of inclusive school culture.

The first one is providing the greatest possible support outside of the school lessons, the aim of which is to prepare the student with disability to complete the common assignments during the lesson (the preventive aspect) or making up for the gaps resulting from the limited support during the school lessons (the corrective aspect). This is a typical approach for the reconstructive trend of inclusive education.

The other way is based on the perception of the mainstream as a set of diversified tasks (treating it as the only trend) – and recognizing the diversification as standard. Naturally, this requires searching for a bond connecting the mainstream and defining its boundaries. These may be the common goals (achieved in various ways) or common actions directed to complete diversified achievements. This assumption more clearly fits into the trend of inclusive education built upon the deconstruction of special needs education.

Further in the study – due to its limited framework – I focused on the understanding of the mainstream in accordance with the first approach, typical of inclusive education, built on the reconstruction (superstructure) of special needs education.

Possible indicators of participation of a student with a disability in the mainstream of the lesson include:

¹ J. Łukasiewicz (1987, p. 15) defines – in simple terms – the ontological contradiction as the assumption that no object may have and not have the same feature.

- unlimited (culturally, mentally, physically) interactions with other participants of the educational process;
- undisturbed access to important social roles in the class team;
- unrestricted use of all the spaces and tools used in the educational process;
- physical presence in the central area of the lesson room (which is not a necessary indicator);
- full participation in activities undertaken by all the students (such as following instructions and answering questions for the entire class).

Apparently, this last element seems to be the easiest indicator of participation in the mainstream of lesson activities. The real problem, however, is telling the difference between physical, cognitive and social participation. An example of physical inclusion, connected with cognitive exclusion, are circumstances in which the student (e.g., with mild intellectual disability) participates in a group discussion or in another entire-class activity, but he or she is not capable of providing substantively correct answers to the questions or following instructions at the level of the other students. The student's physical presence is associated with diversionary cognitive activity. Therefore, the declarations of teachers regarding the assessment of the performance of the same activities by included students are of interest. The results of this study are presented below. They are, therefore, opinions regarding the abilities of students with mild intellectual disability in the scope of their efficient participation in the mainstream of the lesson.

The concept of own research

The presented results are a fragment of a wider longitudinal study concerning the situation of students with mild intellectual disability in general access schools. The studies were performed in three stages (2004, 2009, 2014) using the questionnaire technique. The surveyed group was selected on the basis of the accessibility of the respondents. The survey participants included teachers in Silesian general access schools working with students with mild intellectual disability. The same tool was applied in all the stages. The surveyed group included 450 teachers (respectively, 150 teachers in each stage). The data below presents the declarations of teachers regarding:

- answers provided by students with mild intellectual disability to questions asked of the whole class (as formulated in mainstream of education);

- how students with mild intellectual disability follow general classroom instructions (as formulated in mainstream education) given to all the students.

The presented data reflect the subjective opinions of the surveyed teachers of general access schools. I assume, however, that despite the lack of objective formula, they point out the problems of the cognitive inclusion of students with mild disability into the mainstream of lesson activities. The reason is that the authors of these indications are the persons constructing the methodical dimensions of inclusion, and the opinions they express show the reality they perceive.

Declarations of teachers concerning providing answers to questions and following instructions by students with mild intellectual disability in general access schools in mainstream lesson work – the presentation of own study results

Didactic tasks (questions and instructions), in simple words, are what is expected from students. They are the cognitive and social requirements students are supposed to meet in order to perform the task. Practically, this task is also performed to determine what students have learned (Arends, 1994, p. 127). In other words, the didactic task initializes a situation in which a need appears or a necessity to overcome certain problems. This need brings about a defined action, and the effect represents a sort of achievement (Okoń, 1992, p. 241). An element of the task is an order of receiving a certain state of some future-related item. The tasks may adopt the form of questions and instructions (Kojs, 1988, p. 18).

The declarations concerning questions and instructions are presented in Figures 1 and 2. The analysis of results is not surprising in terms of emphasized difficulties in including the discussed group of students in the mainstream of education (Chrzanowska, 2006; Zamkowska, 2009; Bełza, 2015; Cytowska, 2016). Although the presented data uncover a slightly different scope of the problem from the studies referred to above because they are related not as much to the conditions of learning as to the potential of the student, they remain associated with a widely understood situation of the student with intellectual disability in the general access class.

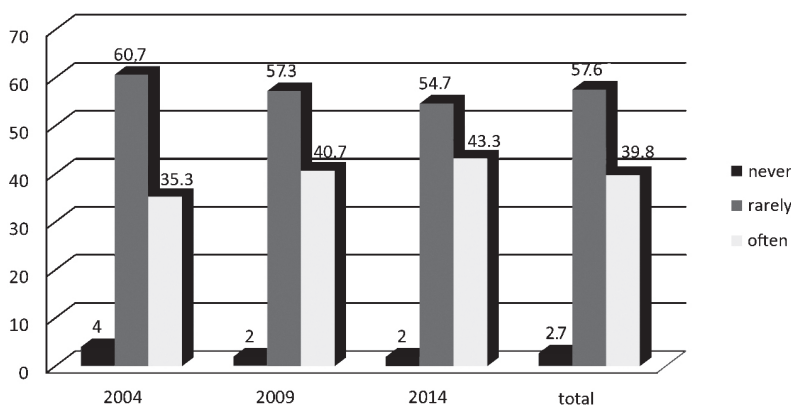


Figure 1.

The ability to answer questions directed to the entire class by students with mild intellectual disability according to surveyed teachers (%).

N = 450

Source: own study.

A positive result is the insignificant number of indications in the category “never,” which means that, generally speaking, the students with mild intellectual disability are able to respond to questions the entire class is asked with a defined frequency. According to the majority of respondents, the students rarely answer questions, and less than 40% of those surveyed declared it happens often. The three stages of the study do not reflect a statistically significant differentiation in their results [$\chi^2 = 3,22$ (df = 4) ni. C = 0,059], which allows one to formulate the thesis of insignificant methodical changes in the scope of inclusive education with reference to students with mild intellectual disability in the period between 2004 and 2014. I would like to leave this problem aside for further discussion below.

The indication of one of the possible declarations by teachers (never, rarely, often) is a simultaneous assessment of a student’s ability to work in the mainstream or indicates the necessity, at least partial, of exclusion from it in order to execute tasks adjusted to the abilities and needs of the student with disability. However, if we adopt necessary procedural differentiation of work in one trend, then the structure of the question is primarily an indicator of the execution of defined goals, and questions (as well as instructions) themselves are becoming one of several elements of organizing the conditions of learning.

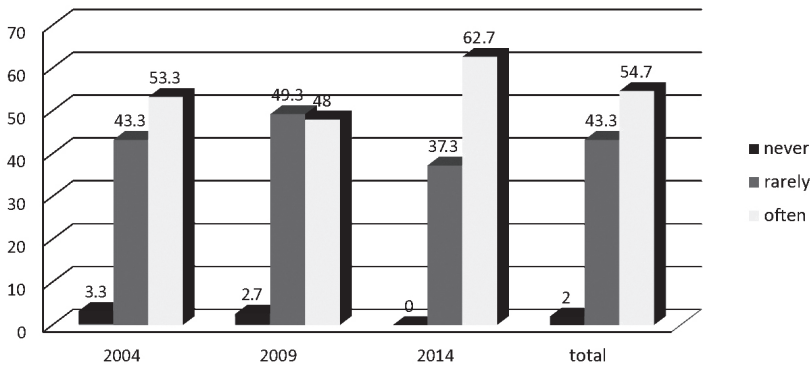


Figure 2.

The ability to understand and follow instructions directed to the entire class by students with mild intellectual disability according to surveyed teachers (%).

N = 450

Source: own study.

On the other hand, in the case of classroom instructions, the stages of the study – which is hard to explain unequivocally – demonstrate statistically significant differences [$\chi^2 = 6,67$ (df = 22) ni. C = 0,121]. The greatest disparities in declarations are visible in the scope of data accumulated in 2014. It is worth noticing that this is a beneficial change, since nearly two-thirds of the teachers indicated the category “often,” whereas none marked the category “rarely.”

A thorough comparative analysis of the teachers’ declarations regarding the students’ ability to answer questions in class and their understanding and performance of classroom instructions shows a difference. According to the teachers, students with mild intellectual disability comprehend and are capable of following instructions given to the whole class more often than they are able to answer classroom questions in mainstream of education. These differences can certainly be explained by the structure of both types of didactic tasks.

The questions more frequently express the desire to gain information “about the condition of the world,” formulate the request or demand providing a defined kind of information (Ziemiński, 1996, p. 130). In the structure of the question, “something” is given in it, and that “something” is to be supplemented

² In order to satisfy the conditions of chi square test the categories of “never” and “rarely” are connected.

with an answer. In instructions, on the other hand, the result of the required activity is provided, as well as the activity itself at times (Kojs, 1988, p. 18).

The notion of instruction can be defined differently and used interchangeably with other notions, such as order, command, prohibition, task, obligation, commission, regulation, request, etc. These notions are slightly different in terms of meaning, but they express requirements imposed by supervising persons onto their subordinates. All them are also identified by the content of information, the level of firmness and their directing to the right goal (Poplucz, 1990, p. 7). The structure of instructions (orders, commands, commissions, recommendations, prohibitions, requests) most commonly is that of an imperative sentence. An instruction, similarly to a question, is constructed of two elements. The first one refers to an operation (an activity) which is to be done, and at the same time, to the demand of its execution. It is expressed by means of an applicable form and mood of the verb. The second part of an order recognises an object or objects, with regard to which or using which the activity is to be performed (Kojs, 1988, p. 18). A lot of the instructions formulated during a lesson, including in the mainstream, refer to relatively simple activities, e.g., organizational (preparatory, procedural, hygienic). Moreover, some of them, including those formulated with relation to the implementation of the teaching contents, require imitative activities (Poplucz, 1990, pp. 9–10). This, in turn, causes the instructions to rarely require the involvement of abstract thinking or logical memory associations – hence performing them is not troublesome for students with mild intellectual disability.

Didactic assignments may indicate and emphasize applicable teaching content, but they also activate and direct the thinking process and consolidate already acquired knowledge (Sośnicki, 1963, p. 88). Thus, provided that they are well understood, they can have a variety of functions depending on their construction and intentions of their creator. Therefore, the construction of the question or instruction, adjusted to the abilities of the recipient and meeting the expectations of the teacher in relation to the executed goal, is of utmost importance. This means that the situational context of the task is also significant. The questions and instructions formulated in the mainstream classroom to the entire class are formulated differently than in the complementary trend. In the first case, the recipient is a group of students with diversified needs and skills, whereas in the other, they are directed to a specific student (or usually a small group of students). The ability to construct efficient didactic tasks is, therefore, an important element of teacher's competencies.

Instead of the conclusion

While describing the acquired results and performed analyses, it must be emphasized that they fit into the paradigm of instructional teaching (in the understanding of Klus-Stańska, 2018, pp. 80–93). Therefore, the findings pointed out above should not be applied in the scope of other paradigms – interpretative and constructivist teaching. In their scope, the analysis of didactic assignments – using them in the lesson structure and their importance for the development of students (both with mild intellectual disability and within the intellectual norm) – would adopt a different form. Slightly different methods of explaining the meaning of questions and instructions for the issue of lesson work would have to be formulated, with the concept of deconstructive inclusion as the starting point. In this approach, it is hard to unequivocally discuss the main trend of lesson activities. A lot of such trends exist by assumption; they are compatible and do not fit into the rules of supremacy / submission. This, in turn, abolishes the problem of opposition of activities adjusted to the majority of students towards the disadvantaged students, since, in fact, all the students are included.

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