

BARRIERS IN POLISH INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN THE OPINION OF STUDENTS' PARENTS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

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Abstract. *The principles of inclusive education have been orientating the ways of working with children and young people with special educational needs for many years. Nevertheless, it is difficult to change the process of modifying the teachers' thinking about a student with disabilities or deficits in the aspect of teaching him in a state school. In 2017, legal acts in Poland were modified to provide psychological and pedagogical assistance to pupils with special educational needs. However, the Ombudsman for Children received many letters from parents of students who gave examples of violations of their rights at school. Therefore, in 2018 a survey was conducted among parents on the difficulties encountered by their children while studying at school. The research results revealed some irregularities both in the aspect of teaching methods which were applied to children and the cooperation of teachers with parents and other specialists. On this basis, it was possible to identify barriers to inclusive education in Polish schools.*

Keywords: *barriers, parents, school, special education needs, students*

Introduction

The views on the education and teaching of sick children, those with disabilities or developmental disorders change from time to time in special education. In accordance with current trends and the state of the art, the most important are their educational and development needs, which can only be satisfied through appropriate conditions and social support. In Poland, as in other countries, fighting for the right of students with special educational needs to be taught in public schools is more and more intense, emphasizing the numerous qualities of such an educational solution. From September 2017, school employees were obliged, on the basis of a modified provision, to provide psychological and pedagogical assistance to pupils with SEN according to specific rules. Nevertheless, it turns out that in school practice, the rights of these pupils are violated. Dissatisfied and disappointed with the support for SEN pupils, their parents addressed letters to the Children's Rights Ombudsman, in which they

sometimes described the tragic situation of their children in public schools. However, dozens of letters do not support the general rule, which is why the Ombudsman Marek Michalak decided to conduct a survey in 2018, in which he asked parents, among other things, about difficulties and educational barriers met in the schools where their children attend. The main aim was to identify the weakest elements of inclusive education in order to propose some innovative and more effective solutions in this area. Actions have been taken in the interest of the children with SEN and their parents who are taking great pains to educate and teach their beloved children.

The right for inclusive education for SEN children in Poland

The Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted by the United Nations on November 20, 1989 became the basis for the creation and subsequent modification of legal provisions regarding the status of the youngest Poles (Hanyś, 2015), including those concerning the right to life, education, or protection against violence. Due to the issues addressed, we are most interested in the children's right to education, which Małgorzata Kozak (2013, p. 119) defines as the natural space, determined by normative law, the processes related to the implementation of formal education within a given system of education and social life processes thanks to which an individual in a specific stage of his/her development called childhood learns to consciously develop themselves, their knowledge, abilities and attitudes, in order to achieve the fullest and creative self-development and participation in social life and to build a culture of respect for human rights."

The basic normative act regulating the access of children and youth to education is included in the Constitution of the Republic of Poland of April 2, 1997 (Journal of Laws of 1997, No. 78, item 483). The following regulations are equally important: Act of 14 December 2016 - Educational Law, Act of 7 September 2001 about the education system with later amendments and the Act of 27 October 2017 on financing educational tasks. Nevertheless, when working with students with special educational needs, teachers are obliged to follow the provisions of the Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 9 August 2017 on the rules for the provision and organization of psychological and pedagogical assistance in public kindergartens, schools and facilities (OJ 2017, item. 1591). The term "special educational needs" was the first time used in 1978 by Helen Mary Warnock in the document entitled "Report of the Committee on Education in Handicapped Children and Young People", indicating that special educational needs apply to children and young people with disability, regardless of their type and severity (Warnock, 1978). Nevertheless, it was widely used after 1994 after the World Conference in Salamanca, during which it was recognized

that "every child has a fundamental right to education and should be given the opportunity to achieve and maintain an appropriate level of education" (Mayor, 1994, p. 2). This means that the school as a second place for parenting, after the family, is obliged to provide appropriate conditions for the development of children and youth with SEN. M. Kozak (2013, p. 138) emphasizes, however, that the children are exposed to educational barriers defined as "the consequences of an unfavourable situation, event or problem resulting from, among others, the situation of an individual student, from the didactic and educational situation, as well as from educational policy, which all limit or completely prevent the implementation of the child's right to participate in educational processes." Joanna Skibska (2012, p. 170-171) agrees with this view and at the same time tries to indicate the elements of the school space, the occurrence of which ensures an increase in efficiency in the support provided to pupils with SEN. She believes that in the education process of students with medical decisions and opinions, it is necessary to include the help of professionally trained teachers working at school and students with positive attitudes towards their colleagues with various disorders and dysfunctions. The whole process must be assisted by specialists who have knowledge and skills related to a specific type of disease or disability, and who cooperate with parents and teachers. All these people should have the opportunity to meet at a school with properly equipped rooms. After all, SEN pupils themselves must be prepared to study at a public school. The situation of pupils with SEN at school changes with new provisions, which requires constant monitoring by researchers. Therefore, a few months after the change of legal regulations in Poland regarding psychological and pedagogical assistance, it was checked what difficulties they encounter in the teaching and education process in public primary schools.

Methodology

The aim of the study was to get to know the opinions of parents of SEN children on the barriers they face in inclusive education in public primary schools in Poland. The survey was preceded by consultations conducted by members of the Team for the Development of Recommendations for Work with Children with Special Educational Needs, appointed by the Ombudsman for Children's Rights. Its members included: special pedagogues and psychologists, members of non-governmental organizations acting to support children with disabilities and developmental deficits, as well as research and teaching staff and parents of students with special educational needs. The team developed a questionnaire for parents of pupils with SEN. The employees of the Office of the Ombudsman for Children' Rights made a deliberate selection of a research sample (parents of students with SEN from primary schools), and then drew 76 schools from all over

Poland (from towns and villages). In March-June 2018, pedagogues and psychologists employed by the OOCR conducted a survey among 445 parents who agreed to express their views on inclusive education for their children. Questionnaires for parents of SEN students were sent by post to their correspondence home addresses provided by school heads. The authors of the article were commissioned to prepare a report on the results obtained. To this end, the project manager applied percentage calculations adequate to the nature of the collected data. Statistical analyses were carried out in the SPSS for Windows program.

Research results

Based on the information obtained from parents participating in the survey, it was found that the average age of students with special educational needs in randomly drawn primary schools was 11 years and 3 months. This means that the subjects studied mostly described the experiences of students from younger classes. 69 % of children had a medical opinion from a psychological and pedagogical center, and 33 % - a medical decisions on the need for special education. The other students had decisions about the need for individual schooling (9 %) and opinions about the need to include them in an individualized educational path. The largest group of students were those with specific learning difficulties, with behavioral or emotional disorders, with educational failures, with intellectual disabilities and autism spectrum disorders. Statements of parents of pupils with SEN made it possible to identify barriers to the education and upbringing of their children in Polish public schools in which the survey was conducted. It turned out that 22 % of students did not attend the schools closest to their place of residence, which indicates that parents had to take care of their travel to and from school. In addition, it should be assumed that children were forced to get up early in the morning to attend classes. Commuting comfort could also be different, which is not desirable for some children due to their health condition. Commuting probably required parents to spend more money on educating their children. The basic question in this area concerns the causes of children's travel to schools located far from their place of residence. One of the reasons may be that about one third of parents have received suggestions from psychological and pedagogical centers or a school on changing the form of child's education. They were told that a special school, an individual tuition or an integration school is a better solution for their children. Some parents could be persuaded by specialists to move their children to another school located much further from the place where they lived. 10 % of parents decided to change school for their children, while 17 % did it due to the lack of implementation of recommendations contained in the medical decision or opinion and difficult relations with teachers or the

school's head. Primarily, the school is a place where the child should have its educational and development needs satisfied. However, the theory does not always coincide with practice and everyday life. Therefore, parents were asked to evaluate certain aspects of supporting their children at school.

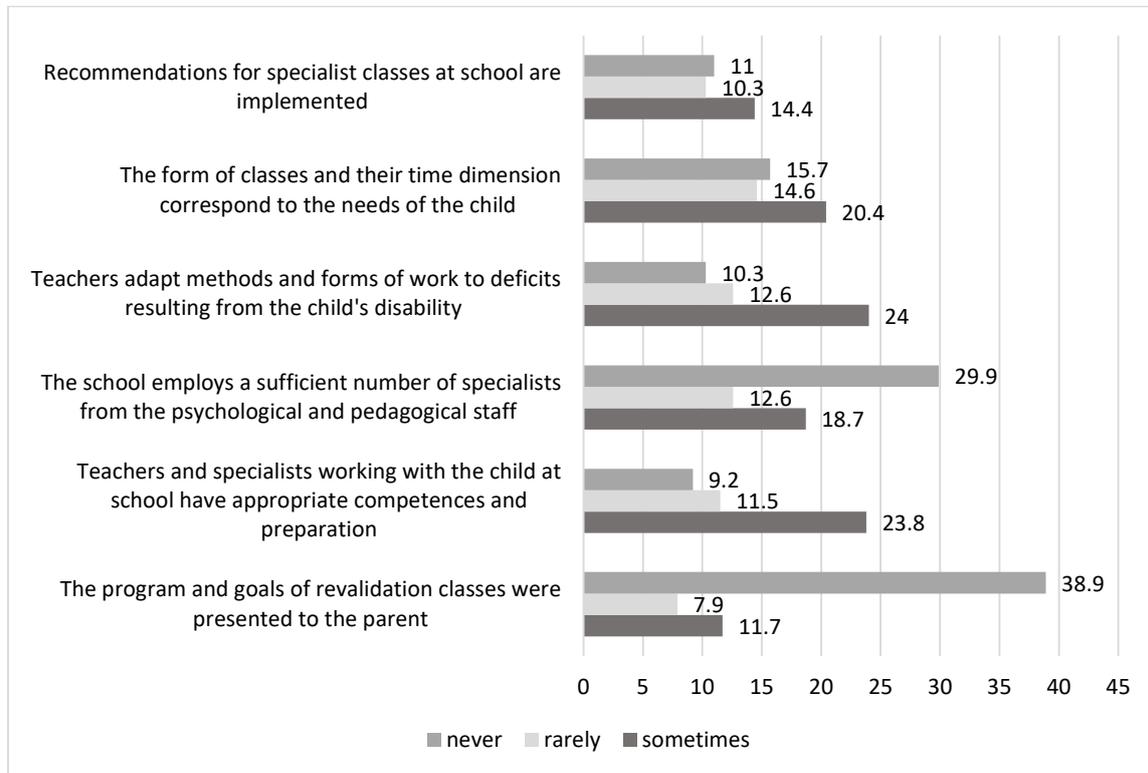


Figure 1 Opinions of SEN pupils' parents on providing psychological and pedagogical assistance in schools (%) (own study)

The data contained in Fig. 1 show that many parents did not have the opportunity to learn about the program and goals of teaching their children, and the number of specialists employed at the school did not correspond to the real needs of their children. In addition, almost 30 % of parents pointed out that the form of classes and their time dimension are not sufficient, and 20 % of them claimed that rarely or never do the school in which their children learn employs competent teachers, properly prepared to work with SEN students, who adapt methods and forms to deficits resulting from their disability during specialized classes recommended by psychological and pedagogical centres. The conditions under which teachers support their pupils are very important, which is why parents had the opportunity to assess them (Figure 2).

A dozen or so percent of parents met with the fact that their children had the time period of specialized classes reduced or they were refused to have them at all due to the lack of financial resources for this purpose. In addition, nearly 70% of

pupils with SEN, in the opinion of parents participating in the survey, did not have access to a calm-down room other a substitute room. Half of them learned in schools in which there was no space suited to their needs or rooms in which individual classes could take place. 1/3 of them did not have the opportunity to move safely around the school.

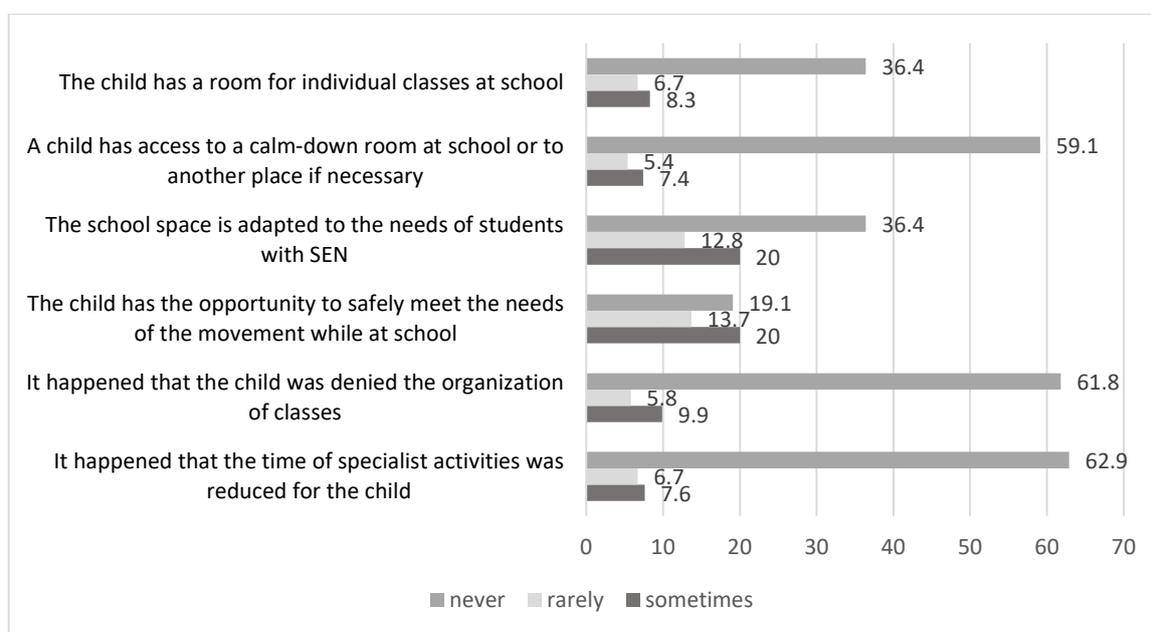


Figure 2 *Opinions of SEN pupils' parents on the terms of providing psychological and pedagogical assistance in schools (%) (own study)*

We often forget that the school does not only have didactic but also upbringing functions. Therefore, it was decided to check how often pupils with special educational needs experience violence in school in the opinion of their parents.

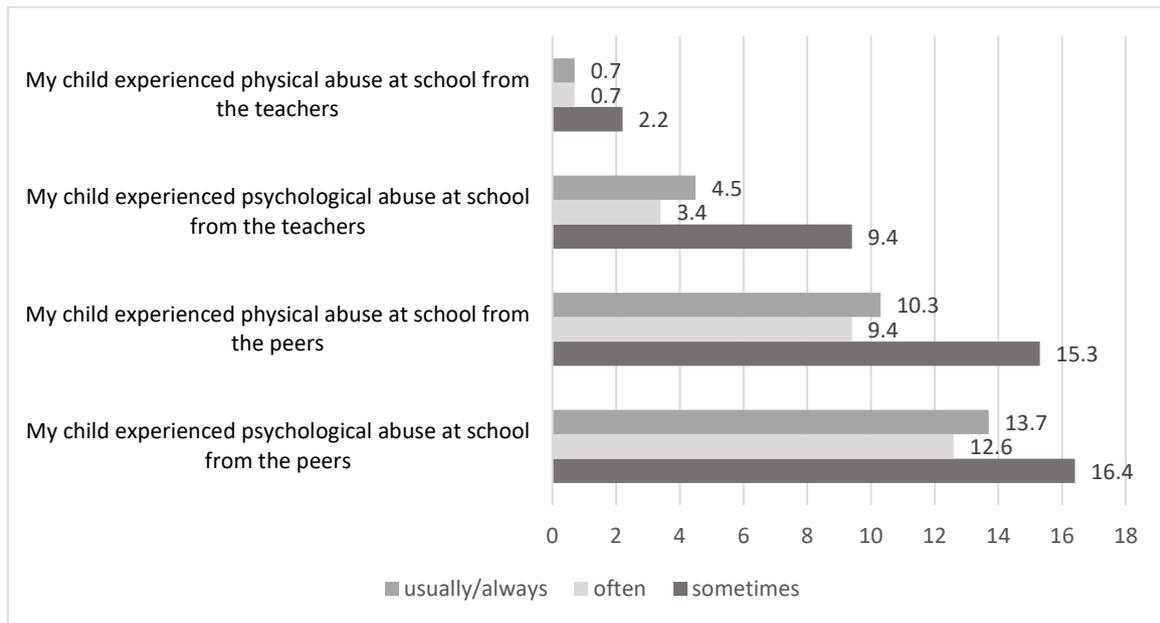


Figure 3 The experience of school violence by SEN pupils in the opinion of their parents (%) (own study)

According to parents' knowledge and their statements on the subject, their children more often experienced both psychological and physical violence on the part of their peers than teachers, although the former definitely dominated in both relations. In general, according to the surveyed people, 56 % of pupils with SEN never experienced or rarely experienced psychological violence and 64 % - physical violence on the part of their peers and 83 % psychological and about 96% physical violence on the part of their teachers. This means that a large group of students were victims from other members of the school community. The pedagogics faces a recent problem, which is difficult to remedy, i.e. should the school be a place where adults adapt the student to the prevailing norms, despite the deficits and disorders or the symptoms of illness or disability they have? 79% of parents thought that teachers should try to put their children in the so-called role of a polite student by all means, which can be very difficult for those who have been diagnosed with the spectrum of autism or behavioral and emotional disorders. In addition, more than 1/3 of parents gave teachers permission to immobilize a child when it is aggressive and threatens to itself or other students, and less than 20 % to temporarily isolate him / her from the group. The question that arises here is whether teachers actually use parents' permission to do so to their students.

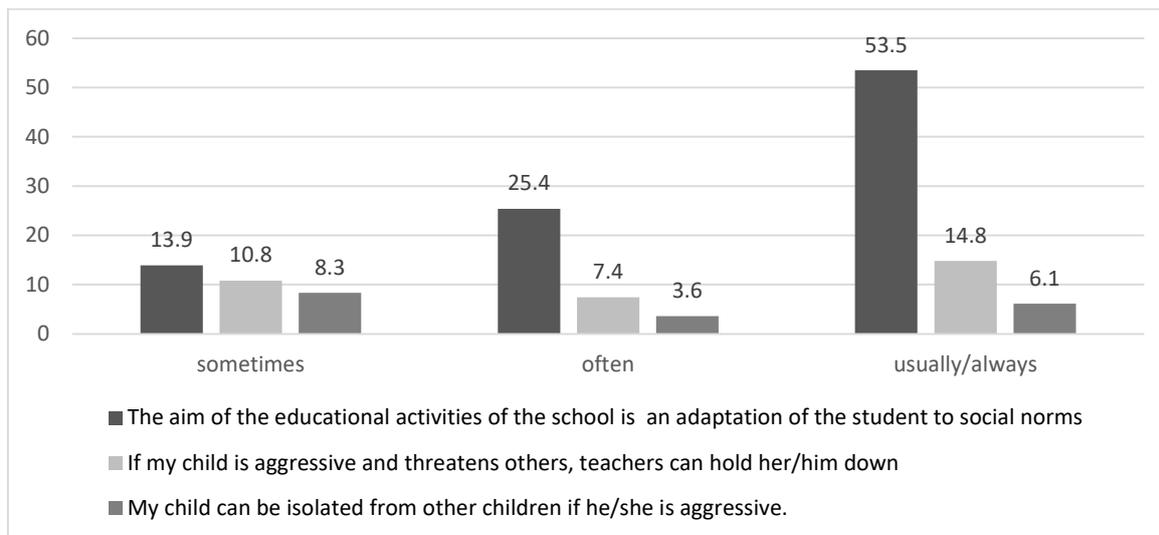


Figure 4 Parents' opinions on the purposes and acceptable behavior of teachers in difficult situations (%) (own study)

Every student, regardless of the difficulties he/she must face, should be provided with appropriate conditions for social development, which is based on frequent contacts with peers, e.g. occasional events, discos, trips etc. In connection with this, parents of children who have medical opinions and decisions issued by psychological and pedagogical counseling staff were asked whether they have the opportunity to take part in them.

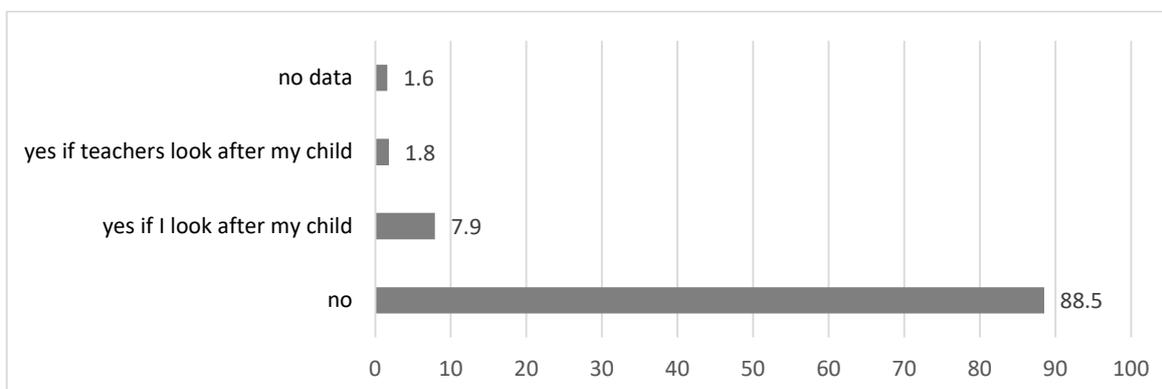


Figure 5 Child's participation in school life in the opinion of parents (%) (own study)

According to the information obtained from the respondents, nearly 90 % of students with SEN did not participate in important school events (trips and school celebrations), which violated their basic rights and prevented the satisfaction of basic social needs. 8 % of parents took part in these celebrations together with their child, as it was a condition for granting him/her permission to be with other students at a school party. Only about 2 % of students integrated with colleagues

during informal school events, with care provided by school staff. A good communication, based on warm relations between teachers and other specialists and the parents of children with disabilities, disorders or illnesses is extremely important. Such an assumption was the basis for another question addressed to the respondents, concerning the difficulties they face in contact with teachers.

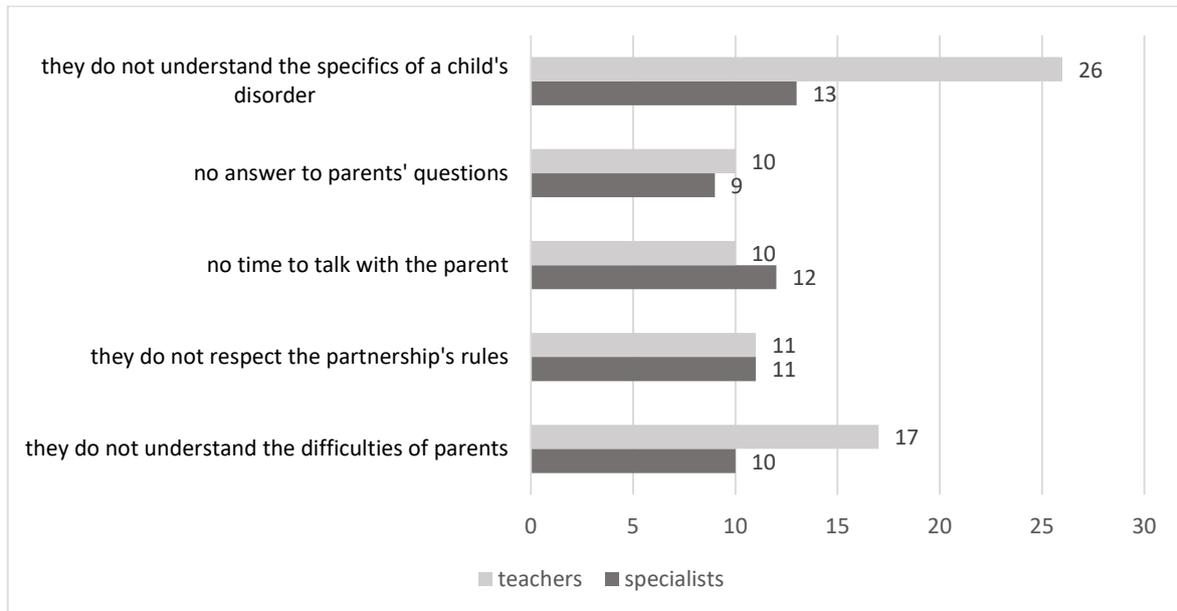


Figure 6 Difficulties of parents of children with SEN in communication with teachers and specialists (%) (own study)

In the opinion of parents of children who have medical opinions or decisions, it was a bit harder to communicate with teachers than other specialists working with their children. Over a quarter of them believed that they did not understand the specificity of the disorder their children have and 17 % did not understand the difficulties they face when raising children with SEN. About 10 % of respondents claimed that both teachers and other specialists did not answer them important questions about dealing with children, their upbringing and teaching, they did not have time for talks and did not treat them as equal partners who have knowledge and skills that allow for partnership cooperation.

Conclusions

Parents of children with medical judgments and opinions issued by psychological and pedagogical centers, of those attending public primary schools shared their opinions on the difficulties faced by pupils with SEN in the teaching and upbringing process. On the basis of the information obtained, it is possible to identify several different groups of barriers in inclusive education in Poland.

These are:

- organizational barriers (e.g. related to the place of learning, forms and time of specialized classes);
- didactic barriers (e.g. forms of work with pupils with SEN);
- educational barriers (e.g. ways of working with aggressive students);
- personal barriers (concerning attitudes of teachers and specialists towards the idea of inclusive education and pupils with SEN).

It is also possible to divide inclusive education barriers differently, i.e. based on the areas of human development. Therefore, it can be concluded that students with SEN in Polish schools encounter restrictions on their:

- physical development (e.g. lack of space for free movement);
- emotional development (e.g. experiencing violence);
- intellectual development (e.g. the lack of suitably qualified specialists to work with pupils with SEN);
- social development (e.g. lack of opportunities to participate in school events) as a result, comprehensive development is impossible (an important role in this respect is played by parents' cooperation with teachers and specialists). It should be emphasized that in the Polish educational system, there have been favorable changes in the legislative provisions, but there is still much to be modified in the practical measures undertaken in schools in such a way as to meet the needs of pupils with SEN to the maximum extent and respect their right to education. This means that we need to continue research on the weakest areas of inclusive education and carry out improvement activities.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank Mr. Marek Michalak, the Ombudsman for Children's Rights, for conducting a survey that aims to respect the rights of students with SEN and to improve their situation at school, as well as all parents who shared their opinions with us about the barriers faced by children and youth in inclusive education in Poland.

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