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## **Disability studies in education: opportunities and challenges of interdisciplinary approaches**

### **Studia o niepełnosprawności w edukacji<sup>1</sup>: możliwości i wyzwania podejść interdyscyplinarnych**

**Abstract:** The phenomenon of disability, traditionally associated primarily with medicine, psychology and special education, which has resulted in the medicalization of the education of people with disabilities, is now becoming the subject of interest across a range of disciplines. The emergence of the social model of disability in the early 1980s led to the development of Disability Studies and Disability Studies in Education, which refers to the socio-cultural processes of constructing disability and draws attention to previously overlooked or marginalized aspects of the experience of limited ability.

The purpose of this article is to reconstruct the emergence and assumptions of Disability Studies in Education in the context of various social ontologies of disability. It will allow us to highlight some of the paradoxes of inclusive pedagogical practices, as well as the opportunities offered by the development of activities based on the combination of theory, practice and research, in

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<sup>1</sup> In the article, I use the Polish translation of the English name disability studies as 'studia o niepełnosprawności' (and not 'studia nadniepełnosprawnościami') in accordance with the demands of disabled communities and researchers representing this discipline (see Pamuła, Szarota and Usiekiewicz, 2018, p. 5 and following).

accordance with the postulate of including the perspectives of all the educational subjects involved.

**Keywords:** education, educational research, interdisciplinarity, disability studies, disability studies in education.

### **Introduction: issues on education and disability**

In Poland, the first changes aimed at the inclusive education of children and young people with disabilities were introduced by the Act on the Education System of 07 September 1991 (Dz. Ustaw, 95, 425). Currently, the Polish education system gives students with disabilities and their parents a choice of the form and place of education, with the most recent changes being the implementation of an inclusive education model as a '*school for all students*' (Booth and Ainscow, 2002; Ober, Twardowski and Pierson, 2015). Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) refers directly to education, which, along with other aspects of life, is strongly linked to the discourse of human rights, civil rights, anti-discrimination and exclusion. It should be based on values central to democratic societies, such as freedom, equality, fraternity, solidarity, respect, responsibility, openness, community. According to Article 24, equal access to social and cultural resources is fundamental to the realization of the rights of persons with disabilities, and a socio-cultural approach and consideration of the voices and experiences of persons with disabilities should be included in social and educational policies. Inclusive education is recognized as the best way to realize the equal right to learn for people with diverse abilities and needs.

The education of people with disabilities has for a very long time remained, and still remains, the domain of special pedagogy, which has been formed as a scientific discipline on the basis of social categorization resulting with the theory of two groups of pupils (Hinz, 2002, p. 357; Szumski, 2016, p. 66). Within this approach students are divided into those who remain '*in the norm*' and those who do not meet the criteria of this norm and constitute a more or less numerous group of people with '*special educational needs*'. And this is the root and, in a sense, irremovable difficulty facing the discipline despite its current intensive development and incorporation of new social theories and research tools into its field of interest. Although inclusive education has been implemented for some time in most Western democracies, including Poland, and the very concept of 'special needs' is being replaced by individual needs or the term '*differentiated needs*' (*different abilities* - Mitchell, 2017, pp. 241-249), it is still permeated by thinking about education shaped

within this source social categorization, and act of separation and exclusion. Despite the many activities aimed at including as many groups of students as possible in mainstream education, it can be noted that they are still too little implemented according to the perspective of pedagogical “*emancipatory rationality*” (Kwaśnica, 2007). What can make it easier to understand this problem is looking at the issue of different approaches to understanding of very disability and hence education of people with disabilities too.

### **Social ontologies of disability and education**

In this part of the article, I will introduce the social ontologies of disability presented in the other publication (Rzeźnicka-Krupa, 2019), within which a specific approach to the issue of constructing the identity of a person with a disability as a learning subject can also emerge. In the perspective of the ontology of disability perceived as a ‘*biological deficit*’ resulting from a disruption of the structures and/or functions of the organism, the subject (learner) marked by this deficit is transformed into an object of external interactions aimed at the best, most effective adaptation to the rules of social life and functioning, deviating as little as possible from the standard norms regulating a given *praxis*. This results in the intensive development of various types of treatment, prostheses, special therapies and teaching. Since the identity of disability is constituted in opposition to an identity embodying wholeness devoid of this lack (in the normative sense), it can be assumed that within this ontology a student with disability (with special, differentiated/individual educational needs) becomes, as it were, burdened with a certain blemish resulting from biological difference, which makes him or her an object of study and classification on the grounds of medicine, psychology, special pedagogy. Meaningful educational practices of the ontology of lack focus on ‘*what is special*’ and adaptive strategies to enable the best possible adaptation, and are therefore focused on correcting, compensating, improving, treating and compensating for deficits, thus sustaining the discourse of individual difference that determines the educational pathway (Rzeźnicka-Krupa, 2019, pp. 80-85).

In the social ontology of oppression, disability is understood relationally as an experience produced and reinforced in the processes of a person’s interaction with unfavourable environmental conditions and structural and systemic barriers, which are the cause of disadvantage for people with disabilities. In the field of action, there is a shift of attention from ‘treatment-oriented’ individual diagnosis, care, rehabilitation and special education towards appropriate social and educational policymaking, the realization of equal

rights and the development of new forms of support in various spheres of life. However, systemic changes do not automatically imply a real change in pedagogical practices towards students who are still labelled as students with special needs, which can activate mechanisms characteristic of the ontology of lack and increase the risk of over-medicalization and secondary stigmatization (Rzeźnicka-Krupa, 2019, pp. 91-103). The essence of such actions is to focus on the identification of individual needs and the construction of specialized offers of support, rather than to critically question the assumptions of an educational system based on neoliberal values, which destroys a community based on equality in the sense that Jacques Rancière gives to this concept (2015). By focusing on the identification and satisfaction of individual needs, education is treated as a tool for building an inclusive society of productive individuals and reveals the exclusionary nature of inclusion (see Masschelein and Simons, 2005; Rzeźnicka-Krupa, 2023a).

An ontology of cultural resistance is a way of understanding disability that refers primarily to seeing disability as an experience of functioning in a world and culture based on ableist values that relate to a phantasmatic model of a healthy, fit, perfect and fully productive body and mind. Within its framework, disability is understood as a product of tangible and intangible practices present in various kinds of cultural texts, modes of action and styles of functioning of institutions (e.g. school, university), which can only be understood in relation to categories of norm and normality (normative culture). It therefore draws attention to the deeper sources of social oppression of disability related to the meanings, values and ideologies that shape social structures, hierarchies and divisions. The critique of ableism leads to a cultural redefinition not only of the concept of disability itself, but also of the categories of *impairment* and *normality* that determine it. Developed in the perspective of cultural resistance, the affirmative approach challenges the normative order based on hierarchical categorizations and its essential feature is to see biological difference as a positive basis for building individual and group identity, promoting positive aspects of lifestyles and life experiences of people with disabilities that can also be rewarding and valuable. It is also expressed in a change of language, with terms that capture group identities, such as “persons with disabilities”, describing clustered but different types of disabilities, or “Deaf” in capital letters, clearly emphasizing the distinctiveness of culturally based sign language. This approach draws attention to issues of self-advocacy, designing friendly social and health policies, increasing access to education, care and different types of services, creating appropriate conditions and opportunities to take up work and lead

independent lives. The cultural perspective goes deeper into the layers and processes of the constitution of society and its structures, within which the identities of actors are produced. Being disabled does not necessarily mean being non-normative (Swain and French, 2000) because the difference ceases to be a significant difference, i.e. one that forms the basis of distinction and the constitution of identity in the perspective of the ontology of lack, as well as the ontology of social oppression, but allows this significant lack/disability to move into the sphere of positive valuation (Rzeznicka-Krupa, 2019, pp. 104-119). What constitutes difference becomes, as a result of dislocation, a structural feature of the subject's condition, and thus the boundaries of subject-producing exclusions move towards a perspective of multiple possible variants of embodiment and *becoming-subject* (Deleuze and Guattari, 2015), including the learning subject (see Rzeznicka-Krupa, 2023b). This is why this approach seems to be the one that comes closest to the principles of inclusive education.

### **Disability studies in education: a field at the intersection of theory, research and practice**

An analysis of the literature in the field of disability studies (Davis 2006; Garland-Thomson 2013; Goodley, 2014; Siebers 2011) reveals that the discipline was formed and developed in an act of disagreement and opposition to earlier representations of disability which arose primarily from the perception of biologically determined limitations as an objectively understood deviation from the established norm, and therefore the functioning of a person with a disability as non-normative, outside the bounds of what is accepted and desirable. As a result of the act of dissent which identified the social and cultural barriers that exist in society and contribute to the exclusion of this group from mainstream society, a new research approach in the form of Disability Studies also began to take shape, around the mid-1970s, alongside social movements fighting for the civil rights of people with disabilities (Shakespeare, 1993; Fleischer and Zames, 2001). Dan Goodley (2014, pp. 3-11). This discipline is a broad area of theory, research and practice that challenges the view of disability as solely or primarily an individual experience, in the language of biology, neurology, genetics, psychophysiology and psychology. In fact, the issue of disability is present at the heart of society and is linked to negative social phenomena such as stigmatization and discrimination, relations of power and subordination, the production of different discourses on disability and social practices, which, as a result, define the framework and the possibilities of functioning of people with disabilities,

often in a more significant way than the limitations directly resulting from physical, sensory or cognitive dysfunctions. In the words of D. Goodley (*ibid.*), Dis/Ability Studies –the notation indicating the interdependence of categories of disability and ability is also relevant here – is a field of research in which these phenomena can only be studied in relation to each other and to a socially recognized norm. Disability studies as an academic discipline, with several stages of development already distinguished (Davis, 2006; Ellis, Garland-Thomson, Kent and Robertson, 2019a) emerged in response to previously dominant discourses and practices that strongly individualized and medicalized disability, developing research and theories that not only offered a different, interdisciplinary, culturally oriented and critically informed cognitive perspective, but also created a space for engagement and action to change the social situation of people with disabilities (Ellis, Garland-Thomson, Kent and Robertson, 2019b). In addition to notions of norm and normativity, the field of disability studies is also significantly shaped by notions of disablement (in the social or so-called British approach) and ableism (in the cultural approach originally developed in the USA), which refer to practices of discrimination against people with disabilities, and which stem from certain systemic features of societies oriented towards the needs and values of the dominant group of able-bodied and standard-functioning people.

Disability studies is now a broad, globally recognized area of inquiry, closely linked to the analysis of social and cultural practices, with its own regionally and historically grounded strands, such as the currently vibrant Global South Disability Studies, or the Eastern Europe Disability Studies developed in the post-communist countries of our European region (Ellis et al., 2019a, 2019b; Pamuła, Szarota and Usiekniewicz, 2018; Głodkowska, Gasik and Pagowska 2016; Głodkowska, 2021). This research approach is highly differentiated and encompasses many strands and sub-disciplines. It ranges from research in the field of social and cultural representations of disability (literature, visual and performing arts, media, design), biographically contextualized ways of experiencing, experiencing and researching limited disability, to the development of new methodologies and ways of theorizing, as well as global, regional and local conditions of living with disability, to non-anthropocentric and interspecies relations, posthumanism and eco-narrations in which what is called disability becomes a position from which we can learn about and interpret the reality around us, questioning the normative patterns and rules that shape its various aspects. Education and issues related to the education of people with disabilities is one of the important

strands of disability studies being developed today. The emerging current of disability studies in education at the beginning of the 21st century was also constituted in an act of peculiar disagreement, a dissent in the sense that J. Rancière (2015) gave to the term. In 1999, at the conference of the American Teacher's Association for Severely Handicapped (TASH), a group called the Coalition for Open Inquiry in Special Education was formed. A year later, a research group was formed within the American Educational Research Association. The inaugural conference was held in 2001 at National-Louise University in Chicago, USA, under the general title *Disability Studies in Education: Critical Reflections on Policy, Practice, and Theory: Critical Reflections on Policy, Practice, and Theory*, where the programmatic principles of the new research strand were discussed. In 2021, the academic journal *Journal of Disability Studies in Education* was launched (Connor, Gabel, Gallagher and Morton, 2008). As can be seen from the dates given, this is a very young academic sub-discipline. It has emerged as a result of the need to think differently about education in the context of the changing realities of the social world and the social and educational policies of contemporary societies, in which people with disabilities are seen as equal and full citizens.

This new area of academic study and research relates to the aims and objectives of Disability Studies primarily through an approach that emphasizes the importance and relevance of the voice of people with disabilities themselves and, in the case of children and young people, their parents and carers, and addresses issues of engagement, advocacy and self-advocacy in matters of education and educational policy (Connor et al., 2008). The discipline focuses on research in the field of education and social policy, looking at issues of disability and diverse educational needs in a wider socio-political context. Referring to different social, cultural, historical, discursive, philosophical, literary, aesthetic, artistic traditions, it critically reflects on the dominance of medical and psychological models of disability in relation to the educational sphere, presents the voices and perspectives of learners (pupils, students) with disabilities on educational issues, focuses on an in-depth understanding of their everyday experiences in schools and universities, in contemporary society, in relation to different cultures and historical contexts, explores efforts to create and maintain inclusive and accessible educational pathways (Connor et al., 2008).

In the field of research and theory, disability studies in education recognises the value of knowledge derived from the experiences of people with disabilities, advocates their participation in research (participatory research) and the collaboration of researchers with and without disabilities.



They develop new epistemologies of research inquiry that emerge from the position of disability, using an intersectional approach to its recognition and understanding as an experience that is also conditioned by other factors related to gender, ethnicity, social class, etc. Identifying the links and dissonances between this discipline and pedagogy/special education, and the changes in school (university) and pedagogical practice that result from the assumptions and aims of this strand is also an important area of research. In the area of theorybuilding, Disability Studies in Education acknowledges the real experiences of students, critically examines educational and social discourses that position such experiences as fundamentally different from the accepted norm, and pushes the boundaries of normative ways of perceiving, thinking, acting and including the experiences and voices of people with disabilities. An important task of this discipline is also to develop pedagogies based on the recognition of disability as part of human diversity and the promotion of positive identities in students, as well as to build knowledge about disability, the history of disability rights movements as part of the civil rights movement, with the aim of changing awareness and negative attitudes towards disability and people experiencing disability, their inclusion in society through education (Connor et al., 2008). Inclusive education here is a particular model of a democratic community based on certain values such as freedom, equality, solidarity, responsibility and caring, and schools are seen as small democratic communities in action, in line with a long tradition of educational research (see Dewey, 1916; Śliwerski, 2008; Hodgood and van Leeuwen, 2019). The field of research thus defined is therefore linked to recognising inclusive education and its principles as the most appropriate educational model.

### **Conclusion - questions on education in diverse communities**

The sketched framework for the study of disability in education raises the question: Does the inevitable and inescapable aporia in the form of the constitution of pedagogy/special education on the act of separation and exclusion to some extent condemn it to banishment from the world of the currently intensively developed interdisciplinary approaches to the phenomenon of disability? Or is it capable of overcoming this ontological and epistemological obstacle? The example of special educators, who initiated a new stream of thinking and research in the form of Disability Studies in Education shows one possible path of transformation in the search for solutions that best meet today's needs and challenges and raises further questions. In educational practice and in relation to our education system, do schools



and other institutions at different levels of education create a welcoming space where people with diverse educational needs can thrive and actively integrate into the community, and where their, as well as their parents', carers' and allies' voices are truly heard? How do legislators and policymakers, people who create educational institutions, understand the values that characterize democratic communities, such as equality, social justice, solidarity, responsibility? How do they understand and define education and its aims, learning processes, inclusiveness, different educational needs? Who are and what is their place in education: pupils, parents, students, teachers, and how do their agency, participation and interdependence manifest themselves?

The answers to these questions depend on concrete practices of action that have materialized in the real, everyday experiences of people with difficulties and limitations due to disability or any socially produced difference that can lead to stigmatization, inequality and exclusion. Piotr Zamojski, writing about education, states that it is a matter "that brings us together and mobilizes us to talk" because of we are not in agreement with a certain state of affairs (2022, pp. 181-182). It is worth engaging in this conversation and searching together for answers to what are often very difficult questions. This is especially true in the context of the current changes in education and discussions about the state of education in Poland.

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