

## (IN)EQUALITY IN EDUCATION

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*The article is about the problem of inequalities in education. This phenomenon is presented in the context of contemporary circumstances. Changes, which have taken place in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, allow for equalization of educational opportunities for students through promotion of various actions. On the other hand these changes may contribute to the intensification of inequality prompting, in consequence, to the social exclusion. Despite many advanced solutions, school still remains a place of selection (tests, grades). It is an area of tensions and didactic failures. It especially relates to those, who do not possess definite knowledge and competences. Meanwhile contemporary education, which promotes a whole life education, imposes on a man a skill and readiness to permanent learning and acting set for success. Therefore school, wanting to prepare all the students to this process, cannot remain indifferent to such phenomena as: school selections, social exclusion, marginalization, but above all, school should take actions leading to leveling them. It is also worth paying attention to the functioning of early childhood education. At this stage some inequalities in education, among children and youngsters, should be equalized. It may be too late, at the next rungs on the educational ladder, to equalize students' opportunities.*

**Keywords:** inequalities in education, school selection, school failures, social exclusion, school segregation, equalization of educational opportunities

Contemporary education is termed “the whole life education”. Her essence lies in a continuous influence on human development at every stage of life. The process of learning takes place from the early age till late maturity not only at school but also during various situations and interactions. Moreover, development of modern technologies provides education with a new dimension, abolishes barriers and shapes reality in a very dynamic way. In the background of socio-economic changes and a recently introduced reform of education, a new generation of students is emerging. It maybe boldly suggested that the traditional process of education may fail in their case. Despite many positive assumptions, the last Polish reform of education system contributed to students' educational failures and introduced school selection into lower-secondary schools.

Development of information and communication technology becomes a very important context for contemporary educational changes. On the one hand it is becoming a source of many possibilities and pedagogical activities,

but on the other hand it contributes to inequality in education, increases the range of didactic failures and school selection.

### Educational failures

How to interpret school failures in the context of the above ideas? – One of the commonly applied definitions suggests that school failures “*are visible discrepancies between students’ performances and school expectations*” (Kupisiewicz, 2000). Thanks to grades received by students, one can not only measure the level of their knowledge and abilities, but also place them into different groups of those who are clever and those who cannot cope with school reality. At first glance, such a division seems to be reasonable, however one should ask himself/herself a question if school requirements and expectations are still in accordance with social and individual expectations. Does it mean that the contemporary school does not protect against failures and exposes students into long-lasting consequences of its faulty functioning? Another issue concerns different socio-economic and bio-psychological conditions of each student. School aspires to comprehensive and harmonious student’s development, but is she able to fulfill the idea of an individual approach taking into account overloaded classrooms with up to 40 students who come from complex family backgrounds?

Changes which are taking place in the contemporary world imply a chain of new conditions, among already existing (socio-economic and bio-psychological), which considerably influence a school student situation.

### Socio-economic causes

A contemporary family, which functioning is substantially different from current cultural models, frequently cannot fulfill her function without support from professional institutions. Parents work is frequently combined with necessity of additional education, whereas the development of a prefigurative culture implies significant changes in functioning across generations (the younger generation takes on a dominant position). As a result, the quality of family relations undergoes profound changes. Harmony in family life, which has a decisive influence on a child’s emotional development, allows for creation of positive emotions and favours a crystallization of personality traits. The results of the research conducted by G. Sartori show that process of personality formation of contemporary children is burdened by risk which results from parents inability to tell their children “no”. Parents treat their children as equals and “*in that way they raise them as little despots, but in reality as wimps who will not be able to deal with reality blows in adulthood*” (Sartori, 2005:93). Longer working hours, a lack of work stability, necessity of a whole life education are some of the factors which influence this state of affairs. A child-partner, a child-adult has to take in everything and take care of himself/herself. Parents’ time spent on talks with children is reduced to a minimum and is mainly filled with orders, lectures, reminders, and sitting without saying anything. It is no surprise that digital media keep some children company in their free time (mainly TV, computer). It leads to a series of changes in their social functioning.

### Biopsychological causes

A contemporary society puts an emphasis on development and progress, thanks to that we can talk about an open society of information in which everyone has access to the science treasury of all humanity (Patzlaff, 2008:95). However, from the pedagogical point of view, media and technology have lots of advantages as well as pose a certain danger.

Assumptions arise among adults that children have the same abilities and forms of thinking as the adults, although they are less shaped. This attitude can be easily seen in well-known postulates involving teaching pre-school children how to use digital media in a reasonable and conscious way. Meanwhile the conscious use of media is a result of development which lasts a long period of time during school education (Patzlaff, 2008:77). Children should be constantly prepared how to properly use media and be aware of the consequences.

Sitting in front of the computer and TV for too long, leads to a decrease in a physical activity, eyesight and postural defects. Obesity increases especially among children and teenagers attending schools (Morbiter, 2007:314). Moreover, the quality and quantity of experience decreases due to spending time in the same environment. This causes *“a lack of impulses from a diverse and rich in sensory experience environment which may lead to inappropriate brain development. Creativity, fantasy and intelligence are doomed to fade away”* (Patzlaff, 2008:104). Moreover, reductionism appears among teenagers in the area of perception of both problem and experience. As a result the teenagers can only deal with those problems which can be solved by means of a computer and use proper software when they do not have appropriate skills for instance when a child cannot draw he or she uses graphic software (Morbiter, 2007:314). It gives a sense of certain illusion and also leads to a loss of some skills for example inability to do mental calculation when only a calculator is used at school.

It can be a tough situation for children who have a limited access to virtual reality due to perception disorders or information processing. These children will be doomed to exclusion from cyber culture or even exposed to ostracism from a real society (Czarkowski, 2009:46).

According to G. Sartori, the multimedia world, which is a natural environment for a development of a cyber generation, will be populated by virtual “I” spread on a multitude of personalities (Sartori, 2005:96) what, without doubt, will promote building a sense of own identity.

The Internet changes a user’s personality, influences his or her activities, shapes certain habits and a way of thinking, creates a new dimension in a man-computer relation. Very often a computer takes on a role of a carer, a babysitter, a peer, and is a cause of emotional disorders of its immature users as well as has a negative influence on human relations. It can also be a source of an addiction. It is worth mentioning IDA syndrome (Internet Addiction Disorder) – infoholizm or ASC syndrome (Alcohol Stupor Condition) – states of consciousness which are similar to alcohol or drug intoxication (Czarkowski, 2009:44).

### School causes

A huge difference, which according to M. Gawrysiak (2010:223), takes place in acquiring knowledge, can be a starting point to show a school’s participation in educational failures. In the past we used to listen to teachers, read books, we did homework, revised a lot of material during classes and as a result we “ were becoming people with knowledge”. At present, our

process of learning is mainly based on searching, looking for information, comparing various sources of information, scanning, downloading files, copying, pasting, chatting: we apply and disseminate information. Education has gone beyond the walls of the school. It indicates a necessity of an utterly different approach to a digital generation. Despite a series of new socio-cultural conditions, school still teaches as if she was the most prominent educational institution. She does not acknowledge informal educational activities and creates, in this context, (in)equality in learning.

Additionally, a stereotype of a “good” student still functions at school and is presented as a submissive person who does not cause any didactic or educational problems.

K. Polak points out that educational success of such a student is mainly conditioned by his or her peaceful attitude towards teachers (Polak, 2007:119) sometimes even at the cost of his or her own needs. Decisions, concerning student’s educational process (methods, form, discipline, grades), are taken without his or her consultation. As a result, the student is devoid of chances to learn to be independent, responsible and active. The system is primarily focused on satisfactory exam results both inside and outside the school without taking into account socio-psychological inequalities among students. Due to civilization progress, it is not possible to have knowledge about a contemporary world since this knowledge becomes quickly outdated. Consequently, the concept of corelativism is becoming more and more popular (Siemens & Conole, 2011) and should also be in the center of attention of a contemporary school.

### The problem of social inequalities in the context of education

Contemporary education has frequently many contradictory aims. It is observed that there are supporters of equalization of opportunities as well as the opponents. The latter suggest that this is the way to decrease standards. Recently those who claim that education should be compatible with needs of economy have gained popularity. T. Gmerek (2011:79) points out that „*The most important aspect of education systems functioning, based on an ideology of free competition of individuals and a free market, is concerned with deepening social and economic differences in the contemporary world.*” Nowadays, more differences are appearing in education systems in social, economic and educational spheres as well as styles of urbanization. In the sphere of education, a process of school hierarchization is visible and according to T. Gmerek (2011: 81), “*children from distinctive environments will come [to these schools] in a disproportional way*”. One might come to the conclusion that the effect of school system functioning, which is dependent on market criteria, increases social inequalities. Education system, above all its hierarchical system, is instrumental in reproduction of a social structure, which in turn increases inequalities. Schools which have “better quality” are attended by students, who have better “economic situation”. This in turn confirms a higher socioeconomic status of more privileged social groups. However, there is also the other side of this phenomenon – educational ghettos – that is schools that are attended by unprivileged individuals which in turn confirms their lower status. This type of school very often marginalizes students and excludes them from the society. Paradoxically, both the former schools and the latter ones function in a democratic society. Single parenting and euro-orphan hood are new dangers

which are a source of inequalities. It is well-known that schools have always played a role of socialization as well as selection.

### Phenomenon of school selection

The previously analyzed problems of social inequalities are connected with social justice issues. M. J. Szymański (2000:138) thinks that „*Afterthoughts on social equality and justice cannot omit education since for ages – at least among some social circles – schooling has had a special value.*” According to the multidimensional model of M. J. Szymański (2000:112), there are systems of conditions arranging selection processes.

I Subjective system – includes conditions stuck in social macrostructures and microstructures, in concrete educational situations and in a student alone.

II Problematic system – economic, social, political, cultural, educational, bio-psychological factors are included here.

III Subjective-problematic system – presented in a form of “knots” which are made up in a place when the two mentioned systems intersect. For instance: a family –cultural factors= a cultural level of a family.

IV System –spontaneously formed situational factors. These factors are difficult to recognize and they appear very often in an unpredictable way. The phenomenon of school segregation contributes to deepening educational inequalities.

School system contributes to social segregation through procedures of dividing students into school units. It is caused by educational policy run by schools. Public school should provide the same conditions of studying independently of a social status. Paying attention to equalization of educational opportunities has also been observed. As the research shows, the right moment to deal with equalization of educational opportunities is at the beginning of pre-school education (Lubowiecka 2004). According to the report - *Wczesna edukacja i opieka nad dzieckiem w Europie i zmniejszanie nierówności społecznych i kulturowych* (2009:75) – education in schools for small children combined with parents’ support is an ideal solution. The report shows that children from ethnic backgrounds have better achievements if they go to preschools. The disadvantaged children, who attend preschool, have a better attitude towards learning in primary school. Education of young children has far-reaching effects. It has a direct relation with cognitive abilities and children’s motivations, it influences an attitude of the family towards education and a quality of children’s interaction during primary and high-school education.

### Conclusions

Equalization of students’ educational opportunities is very often a slogan of educational reforms. Despite this, students selection is made through the medium of school education. As the research results show, it has a connection with a theory of social satisfaction. Students from privileged social environments achieve better results. For example, those who have better performance at the lower-secondary school leaving exam come from environments which favour development. To combat inequalities in the system of education, strategies and tactics can be applied when individual needs of a student are early recognized. Appropriate curriculum should be introduced and applied as well as teachers should be professionally prepared

to teach at school. Day care and pre-school education for each three-year-old child are very crucial factors in combating inequalities. Additionally, a rule of educational partnership is also very helpful, it emphasizes a significant role of parents who should be mutually responsible for a supporting process and development of children's learning.

Naturally, we cannot forget about permanent preparation to aid the appropriate use of information and communication technology without which the XXI century education cannot successfully function.

The authors hope that implementation of education reform system will bring intended effects when specific organizational and financial standards are met and social changes are taken into account.

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