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## Parents' opinions on inclusive education in public schools. Fears, benefits, needs

Opinie rodziców na temat edukacji włączającej w szkołach ogólnodostępnych.  
Obawy, korzyści, potrzeby

### Abstract

**Introduction.** Inclusive education in the pedagogical approach promotes integration, creating an environment that accepts diversity and supports each child in achieving their full potential. An inseparable element of the school triad, in addition to students and teachers, are parents, who are directly involved in the educational process of their children. Proper understanding of the idea of inclusion and building parental involvement are key to implementing inclusive education. Many studies indicate that the level of knowledge of parents and their attitudes towards inclusive education can significantly affect the successes and difficulties associated with the integration of students with different educational and upbringing needs. By learning what concerns and needs parents see, educational practices can be better adapted in the area of deepening educational competences and profes-

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sional support for children and their families in the education system.

**Aim.** The study is focused on learning about the opinions of parents of mainstream institutions on inclusive education, what their beliefs are about it in the context of concerns, benefits, and needs in deepening knowledge in this area.

**Methods and materials.** A focus group study and interview were conducted with parents of a mainstream facility. The article presents the results of qualitative research of an interpretative nature. First, workshops were conducted with parents (questions from the group interview were used) aimed at increasing educational competences in the area of inclusive education, then parents were asked to complete three sentences in the area of: concerns, benefits resulting from the fact that there are different children and needs in terms of knowledge regarding the subject of the meeting. 26 parents of a mainstream facility in the Silesian province were surveyed.

**Results.** Based on the analysis of parents' written and oral statements, three areas of parents' opinions were identified in terms of concerns arising from inclusive education, benefits and satisfaction of knowledge in this area, which became the beginning of a series of meetings with specialists aimed at dispelling parents' concerns by explaining and presenting a scientific, methodical, and practical approach to working with children with special educational needs or specific learning difficulties.

**Conclusion.** In relation to the benefits of inclusive education, parents pointed out that the presence of children with various disabilities or educational needs contributes to the development of empathy, acceptance, and tolerance among students. Concerns related to inclusive education concern the lack of proper support for children without opinions and judgments. Parents fear that the quality of teaching will decrease, because focusing on the needs of children with difficulties may lead to a lower overall level of teaching in the classroom. Parents, supplementing the sentence: "I would like to know..." indicate that there is a need to increase access to information that will help them better understand how inclusive education works. Increasing parents' awareness of the benefits and challenges can lead to a more positive attitude and greater involvement in educational activities. Schools should regularly organize information meetings and workshops with specialists to provide parents with support in understanding inclusive education.

**Keywords:** a child with special educational needs, parents, inclusion education, inclusion, attitudes towards inclusion education.

### **Abstrakt**

**Wprowadzenie.** Edukacja włączająca w podejściu pedagogicznym promuje integrację, tworzenie środowiska akceptującego różnorodność oraz wsparcie każdego dziecka w wykorzystywaniu swojego pełnego potencjału. Nieodłącznym elementem triady szkolnej, oprócz uczniów i nauczycieli są rodzice, którzy bezpośrednio angażują się w proces edu-

kacyjny swoich dzieci. Właściwe zrozumienie idei inkluzji i zaangażowanie rodziców są kluczowe dla implementacji edukacji włączającej. Wiele badań wskazuje, że poziom wiedzy rodziców oraz ich postawy wobec edukacji włączającej mogą znacząco wpływać na sukcesy i trudności związane z integracją uczniów o różnych potrzebach edukacyjnych i wychowawczych. Poprzez poznanie, jakie obawy i potrzeby dostrzegają rodzice, można lepiej dostosować praktyki edukacyjne w obszarze pogłębienia kompetencji wychowawczych oraz profesjonalnego wsparcia dla dzieci i ich rodzin.

**Cel.** Badanie koncentrowało się na poznaniu opinii rodziców dzieci uczęszczających do placówek ogólnodostępnych na temat edukacji włączającej. Badano, jakie mają oni obawy, jakie widzą korzyści i jakie są ich potrzeby w kontekście pogłębienia wiedzy w tym obszarze.

**Metody i materiały.** Przeprowadzono badanie fokusowe i wywiad grupowy z rodzicami placówki ogólnodostępnej. W artykule zaprezentowano wyniki badań jakościowych o charakterze interpretacyjnym. Najpierw zaproszono rodziców i przeprowadzono z nimi warsztaty (wykorzystano pytania z wywiadu grupowego) mające na celu zwiększenie kompetencji wychowawczych w tematyce edukacji włączającej, następnie poproszono rodziców o uzupełnienie trzech zdań dotyczących obaw, korzyści wynikających z tego, że są różne dzieci, i potrzeb w zakresie tematyki spotkania. Przebadano 26 rodziców dzieci uczęszczających do placówki ogólnodostępnej w województwie śląskim.

**Wyniki.** Na podstawie analizy pisemnych i ustnych wypowiedzi rodziców wyodrębniono trzy rodzaje opinii rodziców w kontekście obaw związanych z edukacją włączającą, korzyści z niej płynących i wiedzy, którą chcieliby uzyskać w tym temacie. Na tej podstawie przeprowadzono cykl spotkań ze specjalistami, które miały na celu rozwianie rodzicielskich obaw przez wyjaśnienie i przedstawienie naukowego, metodycznego i praktycznego podejścia do pracy z dziećmi ze specjalnymi potrzebami edukacyjnymi czy specyficznymi trudnościami w uczeniu się.

**Wnioski.** W odniesieniu do korzyści wynikającej z edukacji włączającej rodzice zwrócili uwagę, że obecność dzieci z różnymi niepełnosprawnościami czy potrzebami edukacyjnymi przyczynia się do rozwoju empatii, akceptacji i tolerancji wśród uczniów. Obawy związane z edukacją włączającą dotyczą troski o to, czy dzieci bez opinii i orzeczeń będą miały zapewnione odpowiednie wsparcie. Rodzice obawiają się, że spadnie jakość nauczania, ponieważ koncentracja na potrzebach dzieci z trudnościami może prowadzić do obniżenia ogólnego poziomu nauczania w klasie. Rodzice poprzez uzupełnienie zdania: „Chciałbym się dowiedzieć...” wskazują, że istnieje potrzeba zwiększenia dostępu do informacji, które pomogą im lepiej zrozumieć, jak działa edukacja włączająca. Wzrost świadomości rodziców na temat korzyści i wyzwań może prowadzić do bardziej pozytywnego nastawienia i większego zaangażowania w działania edukacyjne. Szkoły powinny regularnie organizować spotkania informacyjne i warsztaty ze specjalistami, aby pomóc rodzicom zrozumieć edukację włączającą.

*Słowa kluczowe:* dziecko ze specjalnymi potrzebami edukacyjnymi, rodzice, edukacja włączająca, inkluzja, postawy wobec edukacji włączającej.

## Introduction

Inclusive education is based on providing all students with the skills necessary to build an inclusive society where diversity is recognised as a resource needed for social development, regardless of differences in health, ability or background. Such education not only deals with meeting the developmental and educational needs of the child but also strives to support emotional, cognitive, social, physical, and moral development. “An inclusive school is neither a modified special school nor a modified public school – it is a school designed to eliminate barriers (on both sides) and create favourable conditions for the development of special needs students” (Gajdzica, 2019, p. 45). Peter Haug (2017) distinguishes between the horizontal and vertical dimensions of inclusion in his model. “The horizontal dimension includes its general understanding and operationalisation. The vertical dimension concerns the coherence between different political levels and the organisation of inclusion implemented both in society and at school. The combination of these dimensions forms the basis for understanding and practising inclusion” (pp. 207–208). This enables its effective implementation at a theoretical and practical level within social and organisational structures, which is not so obvious, because as Amadeusz Krause (2010) points out, “[...] the idealistic vision of integration [...] has not penetrated not only the social consciousness but also the consciousness of some pedagogues and parents” (p. 162). Agnieszka Woźniak (2012), who analyses the school situation of disabled pupils, believes that their inclusion in mainstream education may be more necessary for their parents. Sometimes they do not allow the thought that their child is limited or imperfect in some way. Perhaps they feel that only through inclusion will their child’s disability not mark them in the local community.

The understanding of inclusive education as a system that assumes that a general education classroom is the only appropriate learning environment for all students with special needs can raise many questions. However, the approach that seeks an educational environment in which students with special educational needs (SEN) achieve optimal educational, social and emotional outcomes is different. According to this opinion, “this education cannot consist of attempts to adapt a student with disabilities to the general education system” (Slee, 2004, pp. 77–78). On the other hand, keeping children with intellectual disabilities in mainstream schools “[...] lowers their self-esteem, intensifies emotional disorders and social isolation. Teach-

ers at mainstream schools often report difficulties in individualising classes for pupils whose level of knowledge is not high” (Woźniak, 2012, p. 113).

These doubts, as Anna Zamkowska (2020) notes, concern

[...] the ambiguity of the concept of inclusive education, the lack of a requirement for empirical verification of the real effectiveness of this form of education, the real possibilities of schools to provide the aforementioned group of pupils with optimal conditions for development, education of appropriate quality and specialist support. In contrast, proponents of a less radical approach to inclusive education, such as Ruth Cigman (2007), who advocates “moderate inclusion,” propose that the progress of pupils should be carefully monitored and that the entire continuum of educational forms should be made available, ranging from special schools to education in a general classroom, with a range of different forms to choose from, the one that best suits the individual needs and abilities of the pupil (p. 215).

The question of which institution parents should choose to shape cognitive development, correct, compensate and support is not an easy one, because “[...] on the one hand, pupils with disabilities, especially those with severe disabilities, who study in mainstream classes will have less access to specialist services, and on the other hand, education in special schools can result in their exclusion and devaluation” (Norwich, 2008, p. 138). Therefore, research in the field of special education reveals scepticism among head teachers and teachers towards inclusive education (cf. Chrzanowska, 2021; Cytowska, 2016; Grzelak, Kubicki, & Orłowska, 2014). The general conclusion from the analyses on inclusive education is that the majority of parents of pupils with and without disabilities declare their acceptance of the idea of joint education (Grzelak et al., 2014; Marciniak-Paprocka, 2017; Hilbert, 2014, as cited in Chrzanowska, 2019). The main reasons for choosing inclusive forms of education in mainstream primary schools include: proximity to the place of residence, the opportunity to develop among able-bodied peers, and the best match between the school and the child’s needs (Grzelak et al., 2014). Parents choose a general secondary school because they believe that their child will learn a trade there, develop among able-bodied peers, and the school itself will be tailored to their needs and interests (Grzelak et al., 2014).

An integral part of inclusive education is personalisation, which allows the teaching process to be adapted to all students with special educational needs, their learning style and pace according to their abilities, taking into account the grading of the difficulty of the material and responding to emotional and social needs. Therefore, to give personalised education a chance in a public school, “[...] certain components related to: multi-level education based on the foundation of holistic diagnosis and areas of func-

tional readiness and the child's maturing developmental processes" (Skibska, 2020, p. 257). Zenon Gajdzica (2015) presents two ways of perceiving and meeting the needs of a pupil with a disability:

Firstly, the idea of defining and emphasising a group of needs referred to as special needs, favours emphasising the differences of a student with disabilities and glorifying the need for deep individualisation. In many circumstances, this strategy can be described as a dead end, because although it serves to take care of the pupil and emphasises his or her presence in the class team, it pushes the pupil to the sidelines of classroom work. This, in turn, cannot promote real inclusion. In the second, the assumption is that all students have similar needs at the initial stage (e.g., to be visible, to be taken care of), but the ways of satisfying them differ. In this concept, the natural inclusion of a student with disabilities in mainstream work becomes the basis, and individualisation becomes an occasional tool (p. 169).

The special needs of these pupils "[...] do not mean that they have different needs, but that due to their more difficult developmental and/or social situation, these needs should be considered more complex, intensified and met to a much lesser extent" (Plichta et al., 2017, p. 14). Personalised needs refer to education that is tailored to the student, not only in terms of compensating for their deficits and deficiencies but also focusing on maximising their potential and strengths. Inclusive education is supposed to shape the awareness that children with various disabilities are in our society and our environment and that we should learn to relate to them, and help them, but not do things for them, and be able to recognise their needs. This requires specialist knowledge, and "[...] the key to the quality of inclusive education, apart from the constant enrichment of methodical concepts of inclusive education, are the competencies and attitudes of teachers and educators" (Gajdzica, 2015, p. 169). Furthermore, Z. Gajdzica (2017) points to the categories of school success and their specification in the opinions of 105 teachers working in an inclusive school (a school open to all with inclusive classes). Successes are achieved in the school's role as an institution that helps parents with child-rearing and in the area of networking, i.e., the school's good relationship with parents, good cooperation between teachers and parents, and cooperation between parents. The author also points to high learning outcomes, effective teaching, and good results in tests and exams. In the school environment (especially in the inclusive system), the role of the teacher-educator is often extended to include diagnostic, therapeutic and specialist competencies. There is a belief that the inclusion process is not a one-off gesture, but a reflection of the otherness of another person.

It is also worth looking at the weaknesses of inclusive education, which are: "[...] the small number of specialist and therapeutic classes, poor cooperation with parents,

peer relationships, and threats such as insufficient funds to meet special needs, the promotion of inclusive education for all pupils, the current core curriculum and assessment” (Gołubiew-Konieczna, 2020, p. 237).

Inclusion and inclusive education differ in scope and context of use, as Marzenna Zaorska (2018) points out:

[...] the term “inclusive education” refers to the process of striving towards a set goal, the goal of inclusive education being to integrate students who are subject to inclusion. Inclusion and integration are needed by children and young people who do not meet the standard requirements in their psychophysical and psychosocial development and require additional (special and specialised) assistance in adapting to the structures of the education system and its requirements, assistance without which they will not be able to cope on their own (p. 16).

According to the author, inclusive education should not be equated with education for inclusion, because

[...] inclusive education is a path leading to inclusion. Only when inclusion occurs (assumed based on set criteria, but with developmental characteristics), does inclusive education begin, i.e., education characterised by the criterion of the realisation of the criterion of inclusion. Social inclusion is the result of integrating individuals and social groups into the functioning of society (Zaorska, 2018, p. 16).

Sylwia Sipko (2018) believes that teaching children empathy is a way to counteract exclusion in public spaces. According to her, empathy

[...] Firstly, it is of practical importance when it comes to taking action and showing great understanding for those who are excluded and helping them to reintegrate into society. Secondly, it is preventative, to ensure that such exclusion does not occur. People who can empathise with others will have the ability to overcome any circumstances that could lead to the isolation of different social groups or individuals. Young people with a lack of empathy have difficulty establishing relationships with their peers. This can lead to conflicts between them or result in avoidance of contact. This can lead to the exclusion of people who do not correspond to our idea of other people, in short, our view of the world, and to isolation from the environment, loneliness and the associated suffering (p. 59).

Parents of children with disabilities are not only looking for a friendly and safe place for their child to fulfil their compulsory schooling but also a facility where their child can develop their full potential.

Sometimes a pupil changes schools because they are unable to function and develop in any of them due to the unfriendly atmosphere. Often, the lack of acceptance in the school environment is caused by unfriendly or hostile pupils, but also by teachers who are not willing to work with a pupil with a disability. From the first days of school, a child may hear many unpleasant comments and experience unpleasant emotions. That is why it is so important to prepare the school environment for the effective inclusion of children with disabilities (Bednarz, 2019, p. 150).

## **Review of research on inclusive education**

Research on the integration and inclusion of pupils with disabilities is crucial because it enables the improvement of educational practices and supports the full participation of students in school and social life. The research revolves around the following topics:

- theoretical, formal and organisational foundations of integration and inclusion;
- methods and strategies supporting inclusive education;
- peer relationships in integrated and inclusive classrooms;
- parents' attitudes and opinions regarding segregation, integration and inclusive education;
- teachers' attitudes towards segregation, integration and educational inclusion;
- the opinions and attitudes of pupils with disabilities in the context of their education in mainstream and integrated schools (Domagała-Zyśk, 2018).

This paper aims to broaden the perspective on the opinion on inclusive education among parents of children without disabilities and parents of children with special educational needs attending mainstream schools.

In the context of the issue in question, it is worth mentioning the concept of a sense of coherence, which, according to Arron Antonovsky (1995), includes: “[...] comprehensibility, manageability or controllability and meaningfulness. The sense of comprehensibility refers to the cognitive aspect of a situation. Information can be perceived as coherent, organised, structured and clear or chaotic, disordered, random, accidental or unexplained” (p. 32). Research by A. Antonovsky (1995) has shown that a strong sense of coherence characterises people who are open to others and their potential problems. As the sense of coherence decreases, there is an increasing tendency to isolate oneself from others and to withdraw into oneself. The elements

mentioned are important in inclusive education for all parents, both for children with a certificate/assessment and for parents of children without disabilities. Parents should be informed about the objectives, forms, working methods and adjustments related to the educational process, as a lack of understanding can lead to fear and uncertainty and, consequently, negatively affect their attitudes. Resourcefulness can result from access to teaching materials and specialists. If parents know that their child receives specialised support during lessons and rehabilitation or corrective-compensatory activities, this strengthens their confidence in their actions and decisions. Sense can be based on the fact that parents see inclusive education as a value and educational and social goal, which can increase their involvement in the activities of the institution. One of the main conditions for a sense of coherence is good cooperation between teachers and parents, with a particular focus on effective communication centred on the exchange of information and the search for understanding in an atmosphere of respect, because “[...] the parent cannot be treated in this relationship as an assistant to the teacher/specialist or as someone who follows their orders, but as an equal participant in the process” (Twardowski, 2012, p. 10).

A process that does not include all participants is a pseudo-inclusive education, a pseudo-inclusion that weakens the mental health of (not only) the parent of a child with special needs. “Not including parents in the inclusion process as partners in the inclusive school culture, but treating them from a position of authority over them or completely ignoring them in this process causes the breakdown of the community that creates an inclusive school culture in the process of real inclusion” (Kossowska, 2018, p. 209).

The beginning of all activities between the teacher and the parent is communication and the belief that we work for the good of the child and the class in an educational partnership that can be defined as:

- a type of partnership in which the partners pursue common educational goals under previously established conditions of cooperation;
- a type of relationship involving mutual influence exerted by individual entities within the educational environment (Mendel, 2000).

Cooperation with parents is an integral part of the school's work, as it is crucial for the educational and upbringing process. Parents are a child's first teachers and have the most complete knowledge of their needs, abilities, and challenges, which is why cooperation “[...] should focus on basic areas such as partnership, joint action and mutual assistance, and the efficient exchange of information” (Szczepkowska, 2019, p. 8). Katarzyna Szczepkowska, based on conversations with parents and teachers, notes that the lack of success in the cooperation of both parties is related to the lack of knowledge of mutual expectations.

Parents' most common expectations concern the qualifications and attitude of the teacher, the school as an institution, and the form of contact and flow of information between them and the institution. They believe that:

- the teacher should have good subject knowledge, be able to solve problems, like and know the children they teach well, accept them, run interesting activities at a high level, be an authority figure, adapt the requirements to the abilities of each child and be fair, enforce requirements, keep to agreements;
- the school should function in such a way as to guarantee the child a sense of security, ensure comprehensive development and high-quality education, classes should be well equipped and not too numerous, lessons should start in the morning, more difficult subjects should be taught in earlier lessons;
- contact and information flow – the teacher should provide reliable and complete information about the child, should be easily accessible and respond quickly to emails, should remind about all events in the life of the class well in advance and not expect that it is possible to prepare something for the next day, should keep up to date on all problems and solve them.

Teachers usually expect the following from parents:

- open and honest communication about problems their child has at school and home;
- parents objectively presenting their child's situation at home and the problems at school that their child has reported to them, and being aware that the information their child provides about events that have taken place at school is often subjective;
- parents systematically contacting the institution and showing constant interest in what happens daily in the child's life at school and home;
- parents accepting the teacher as an authority on teaching and education and recognising and respecting their daily work;
- parents following the school's instructions and believing that teachers know what is good for the child because they are specialists;
- recognising the changes that take place in the child thanks to the efforts of the teacher and the school, appreciating them, being satisfied with the child's progress, cooperation and collaboration – often understood as following the school's recommendations (Szczepkowska, 2019, p. 6).

Cooperation should not consist of fulfilling each other's (sometimes impossible) expectations, blaming, or pointing fingers. It should be focused on getting to know each other's needs, creating space to address concerns, and finding solutions in various educational situations. Mutual understanding is key, and dialogue is needed

to break down barriers resulting from negative attitudes toward each other.

Katarzyna Nadachewicz and Małgorzata Bilewicz (2020) surveyed 225 parents (117 women and 108 men) in selected primary schools with inclusive classes to find answers to the question: What expectations do the parents have of the teacher? All parents surveyed said that what they value most in a teacher is fairness, recognising and openly communicating the child's strengths, tolerance and openness. The external appearance of the teacher is the least important for the group of parents surveyed. Women appreciate a teacher who is kind, competent, well-mannered, fair, tolerant, looking for ways to reach the child, recognising emerging problems and strengths of the child, objective, warm, wise, dutiful, conscientious and open, demanding and creative, direct, communicative, has a comprehensive education. Men appreciate high culture, fairness, objectivity, communicativeness, wisdom, openness, seeking ways to reach the child, noticing emerging problems and strengths of the child, and objectivity.

The aim of Iwona Myśliwczyk's (2016) research was to reconstruct statements and learn about the subjective opinions of parents on the education of their disabled children in a public kindergarten. The analysis of the narratives proves that some parents want to fit their children into the criteria of normality at all costs. Parents feel that educating their child in a public institution brings with it the hope of "normality." Parents do not realise how much effort education in such a facility requires from the child. Not all of them also recognise the child's right to be "different"; more often than not, the choice of a public kindergarten is based on the parents' ambitions rather than on the child's predispositions. The biggest disappointment for parents is when their children are afraid of their children with disabilities. The lack of acceptance of their disabled child by their peers made them feel powerless and helpless. The training and competence of teachers in working with children with special educational needs is of great importance to parents. Integration and inclusion are terms that mean little to the parents of a disabled child because the most important thing for them is how the child fits in with the group of non-disabled children, how their development is progressing, how their peers perceive them, and how the teachers work with them.

The mothers of children with Down's syndrome see the need for both integrated/inclusive classes, especially in the early stages of education, as well as special classes that teach practical skills and prepare children for independent living. They point to the negative attitude of peers towards people with Down syndrome and the lack of preparation of teachers in mainstream schools, too many classes, and lack of teaching facilities (Ćwirynkało, Żyta, 2014).

Joanna Skibska (2016) was looking for answers to the following questions: What positive or negative aspects of integration do the parents surveyed perceive?

What measures should the institution take to improve the quality of its activities? The survey was conducted on a sample of 70 parents of healthy children and 50 parents of children with special educational needs. The author came to the following observations:

- More than 50% of the parents surveyed emphasised that the advantages of integration are the care and organisation of education, i.e. small class sizes and the care provided by two teachers. On the other hand, more than 30% of the respondents saw the positive aspects of integration in recognising the needs and problems of children with SEN. For more than 40% of the parents surveyed, the advantages of integration are learning tolerance and acceptance, as well as learning respect and sensitivity to the needs of others.
- Parents of children with special educational needs see more positive aspects in the opinions of the parents surveyed. They are the ones who observe developmental changes in the social, emotional and communicative spheres, while 31% of the parents of healthy children surveyed did not notice any changes that had occurred in their child as a result of participating in the integration process.
- As many as 70% of the respondents did not indicate any negative aspects of integration, while the rest of the respondents mentioned difficulties with the functioning of healthy children in an inclusive classroom as one of the problems, which results from the disruption of the educational process by children with special educational needs (20%). Difficulties with tolerance and understanding of the problems of children with SEN and their parents are also mentioned (over 20%).
- More than 50% of the parents surveyed want to improve the quality of the inclusion and integration activities undertaken, they want to fully and directly participate in the integration process by organising and participating in class and school events related to integration activities, for example in class events, family picnics, integration Olympics.
- More than 40% of the parents surveyed would like to deepen their knowledge of diagnostics and developmental deficits as well as integration and inclusive education. In contrast, 27% of the respondents would like all children to receive care and specialised psychological and pedagogical support. The importance of individualisation and adapting educational requirements to the needs and abilities of the child was emphasised.
- Among the significant changes indicated by 22% of the respondents was the aim to involve all teachers working in the school in integration and inclusive education and to improve their qualifications by participating in courses and training so that they can support integration activities carried out in the school and better understand the needs of all students learning in integrated classes.

Marzena Lisowska (2016) conducted a survey with 15 parents of children with autism spectrum disorder and found that 87% of respondents see the need to organise meetings for parents of children with disabilities. Parents who recognise the need to organise such meetings also expressed their expectations. They feel the need to exchange information about the disorder and their rights. Parents also want to have access to information about camps and various forms of therapy, as well as how to raise funds for therapy. They also need to exchange experiences with other parents, to realise that certain behaviours of children with disabilities are normal for them, and to feel understood and supported by other parents. These were the most important issues mentioned by the respondents. It turns out that the parents surveyed receive the most support from other parents.

Monika Gołubiew-Konieczna (2020) analysed a SWOT analysis with 60 teachers from kindergartens and public schools on the subject of inclusive education. Among the weaknesses, in addition to the small number of specialised and therapeutic activities and peer relationships between able-bodied students and students with disabilities, she also found cooperation with parents.

## Research process

Focus groups were conducted with parents of children with special educational needs and specific learning difficulties and with parents of children without disabilities in the context of inclusive education. The focus groups centred on finding out what parents think about the current and sensitive topic of inclusive education.

The focus group was conducted on a traditional concept to find out what parents think about inclusive education in a mainstream school. Focus groups are a method in which the researcher collects the information needed to solve the research problem through cooperation and interaction in a group of participants. Due to the qualitative nature of focus groups, the selection of the group was deliberate. A *focus group* was chosen – a traditional group, usually with 6–9 participants. The focus group was organised as a *single-focus group* – a focus group interview conducted with one or possibly several groups, during which research data is collected in one session (Lisek-Michalska, 2013).

26 parents (23 mothers and 3 fathers) of pupils with special educational needs (14 children with a certificate) and specific learning difficulties (5 children with an opinion from a psychological and pedagogical counselling centre) and children without difficulties (7) took part in the study. The respondents were divided into three groups, depending on the choice of meeting date. The meeting took place in a stationary form, at a public school in the Silesian Voivodeship. Parents were invited to a workshop on inclusive education entitled *Co-creating an inclusive environment: How to effec-*

*tively support children in inclusive education.* The meeting was a one-off event, with an intended duration of 60 minutes, but was extended to 90 minutes in two groups (due to the large number of questions).

The research procedure was based on the steps of the interpretive qualitative research method, which made it possible to get to the subjective experiences and understand how parents of children with disabilities and parents of children without disabilities perceive the process of inclusive education, what concerns they have, what benefits they see and what knowledge they would like to acquire in this area. During the workshops, the moderator asked the participants to complete sentences in writing in the three areas mentioned. The focus group interview script included the following specific issues:

1. What benefits of inclusive education do the parents indicate?
2. What concerns do the parents have regarding inclusive education?
3. What knowledge would the parents like to gain regarding inclusive education?

The focus group allowed the respondents to express their opinions and personal experiences regarding inclusive education. These were communicated in written form (written supplement to the statements) and oral form (participation in the workshop). The workshop moderator ensured that the participants expressed all their needs regarding the topic of the meeting when asking questions. He acted as a facilitator and made sure that the participants felt safe, guided them in adapting the content and commenting on the exercises. There were no emotionally difficult situations for the participants during the meeting.

## **Research results**

The problem questions were answered by analysing the empirical material, i.e. the statements of the respondents.

1. The benefits of inclusive education in the opinions of the surveyed parents (n=26) were presented in writing. The sentence: “The good thing about having different children in the classroom is that...” had to be completed.
  - - it teaches tolerance and sensitises, it builds the character trait of empathy;
  - Everyone learns tolerance, acceptance of differences and respect for others;
  - pupils learn tolerance, become accustomed to differences and familiarise themselves with various disabilities;
  - everyone can learn tolerance and acceptance of others,
  - the other children can learn to be understanding and accept others that everyone is special in their way and that being different does not mean being worse;

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- we learn to accept each other and that everyone is special;
  - the child can get to know the world and other people as they are, not just the sugar-coated version;
  - shaping tolerance;
  - they can learn from the start that every child is valuable, and this knowledge and respect they learn will allow them to respect others in adult life;
  - my child will find a peer group with whom they will get along;
  - they can become more sensitive to the needs and abilities of their peers;
  - children learn to support those with greater needs and show understanding;
  - pupils pay attention to the needs of others;
  - they can learn from each other;
  - they learn empathy and how to help;
  - each child can learn valuable values from another, and recognise their uniqueness despite their differences, which allows for acceptance, understanding and self-confidence;
  - thanks to this, we realise that otherness is not bad and that tolerance is needed towards every person, regardless of the difficulties they face;
  - they will be able to see beauty even in seemingly ugly things and imperfect people;
  - children can learn to accept and respect other people;
  - they can be open to the otherness of each person, get to know each other and enjoy it;
  - we can show that different does not mean worse because everyone should be treated with respect;
  - everyone will learn empathy, acceptance, and tolerance;
  - thanks to the differences of each child, they can learn different points of view on certain things, they can learn from the experiences of other children, they gain greater tolerance for differences;
  - thanks to this, children learn tolerance, they know that everyone is different and we have to accept each other;
  - children start to realise that everyone has different abilities;
  - children learn to be understanding, they see that everyone is different and that is not a bad thing.
2. Concerns about inclusive education in the opinions of the parents surveyed (n=26) were presented in writing. The sentence “I am afraid...” had to be completed.
- that our children will be less prepared, that teachers will focus their attention exclusively on pupils with special needs;
  - that not every child is tolerant;

- whether every pupil will understand the needs of another pupil;
  - that children will not help each other;
  - that despite acceptance workshops, children will still tease each other;
  - that children will not like the person/people with disabilities and will not want to work with them;
  - that healthy children will be treated differently to children with disabilities;
  - that children will be antisocial and will not want to be friends with a child with a disability;
  - that not every child can show respect and tolerance;
  - that in some families there are completely different parenting styles and it will be difficult to compromise with parents or children;
  - that my child will not be accepted for their individuality;
  - that healthy children will pick up bad habits from children with difficulties;
  - that children with difficulties will put other children down;
  - that the teacher will pay too little attention to children without disabilities;
  - that the whole class will have to work more slowly because of the disabled child;
  - that there will be divisions and resentment among parents after all;
  - that there may be people who do not believe in their abilities and talents, who judge themselves and compare themselves with other students;
  - that my child is too advanced for the class and will not develop properly;
  - that the children will have difficulty concentrating on the lessons and will be constantly paying attention to the pupils with disabilities;
  - that some pupils in the class will still be discriminated against;
  - that they will be ridiculed by others in the class;
  - that the pupils will not always accept and respect each other;
  - that it will be difficult for children to understand the needs of children who are weaker than them;
  - that in every class there will be at least one person who will make life difficult for someone with a disability;
  - that not everyone can accept inclusive education;
  - that not all children immediately accept that someone is different/disabled.
3. The area of needs and knowledge that the surveyed parents would like to acquire (n=26) was presented in written form. The sentence: “I would like to learn...” had to be completed.
- what the learning process in such a class will be like and whether each child will receive adequate attention;
  - how to help children with disabilities;

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- how to create the best possible atmosphere for all children;
  - what impact inclusion will have on the child's further education and personal development;
  - whether children can help each other despite their differences;
  - how to support my child in this class/environment;
  - how can I help my child to feel better, function better and learn better;
  - how to effectively increase the level of tolerance and acceptance in the classroom;
  - how to teach children tolerance for otherness and difference, increase awareness;
  - how to effectively increase the level of integration of children in the classroom;
  - how I can help the school as a parent;
  - how to explain the difference between disabled people and healthy children;
  - how each of the children in the classroom sees their class and how they perceive their peers;
  - how to be a good friend to a disabled friend;
  - how to awaken the potential that lies hidden in every person;
  - how to build self-esteem in a person/child who lacks it. How to talk to such a person and how to help them;
  - more about pupils with different educational needs and support options;
  - how to effectively teach children tolerance;
  - whether my child will be sufficiently prepared for further education in terms of mathematics;
  - how to deal with a child with a disability and how to make my child more sensitive to otherness;
  - do all children feel accepted and beautiful for who they are and not for what they look like?
  - how should we talk to children with disabilities?
  - how do children with difficulties function?
  - how does a disabled child function daily and what was the main reason for enrolling them in an inclusive institution?

## **Conclusion**

Concerning the benefits of inclusive education, parents emphasised that the presence of children with different disabilities or educational needs contributes to the development of empathy, acceptance, tolerance and a willingness to help among pupils. Nobody paid attention to the fact that diversity enables learning through different perspec-

tives, which can significantly influence communication and cooperation between students. Concerns about inclusive education mainly relate to the question of whether children without a diagnosis or a certificate will receive adequate support. Parents are concerned that the quality of teaching will decline because focusing on the needs of children with difficulties can lead to a lowering of the overall level of teaching in the classroom. Parents indicate in the comments under the sentence “I would like to learn more about...” that there is a need for more access to information that will help them better understand how inclusive education works. Increasing parents’ awareness of the benefits and challenges can lead to a more positive attitude and greater involvement in educational activities. Schools should organise regular information meetings and workshops with specialists to provide parents with support in understanding inclusive education.

The role of teachers and parents in working together for inclusive education requires goodwill, good intentions, openness and respect. In the process of building relationships, it is important to recognise mutual relationships, learn about needs and give space to act based on clear principles. A recommendation for teachers regarding pedagogical interventions that have a positive impact on strengthening the educational competencies of parents are workshop meetings for all parents on the subject of special needs. Many difficult situations arise because parents do not know or understand the limitations of pupils with impairments and disabilities. Parents’ statements can be a topic of discussion in the area of: “I would like to learn...” “They must focus on providing specific, practical advice on how to behave in everyday situations” (Pyżalski, 2019, p. 223). Beata Rola (2019) proposes several solutions aimed at better cooperation with parents:

- creation of a “parental room” – a permanent meeting place for teachers and parents, which serves to build a comfortable atmosphere for conversations;
- open classes enabling observation of their children among able-bodied peers, which serves to verify their child’s knowledge and skills;
- meetings with an expert – an external specialist who will answer parents’ questions;
- exchange of information during a triad meeting: teacher–parent–child, i.e., discussions about students’ matters in the presence of the students themselves, to give all participants a sense of agency;
- organising external support groups for parents without the participation of school staff to give them greater peace of mind.

The challenge for education is to observe, listen and come to conclusions that clearly show why we should talk about inclusive education.

To create a “toolbox for cooperation” between school and parents, it is important to remember mutual understanding without judgement, careful listening, being sensitive

to needs, openness, honesty, joint planning of activities and support for the child, regular contact and exchange of observations, and support in difficult situations.

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