

Religious education of children with special needs

S U M M A R Y

The presented doctoral thesis concerns the experience of religion teachers and parents of children with intellectual disabilities to a light degree in religious education. The author - based on the results of qualitative research - makes an attempt to show the whole problem of religious education of children with intellectual disabilities in Poland

In the world lives over one billion disabled people, with different type and level of disability. Every disability is associated with some limitations and difficulties in the functioning of affected person, as well as her relatives. For decades, the problem of disability has been an inconvenient, embarrassing and marginalized subject. Little attention was paid to such aspects as: improving the quality of disabled person's life, its value, respect for it, understanding, integration. However, it should be noted what T. Witkowski regards, that when we are thinking about a disabled person, we should remember that he is still a person. T. Witkowski emphasizes the need to treat every human being as a subject, as the highest value. This fact is important for disabled people not to lose the value of the human person. Like all of them, they have the right to co-create and use the goods of civilization. Limited, to varying degrees, independence of people with intellectual disabilities, definitely does not prevent them from seeking to full development and adapt to living in the community. However, this process is conditioned by the attitude and action of the society. It can be noticed that a part of the society still negatively perceives the socialization of the intellectually disabled, which means that they are often rejected, condemned to vegetation and social inactivity.

Education of people with intellectual disabilities is a relatively new process. When planning educational issues of these people, attention was paid to necessity of support their mental development. Consequence of taking these aspects in education is the systematic improvement of the quality of life of people with special needs. Knowledge of developmental changes and modification of symptoms are not sufficient to understand the

meaning of life of people with intellectual disabilities. It is important to see a specific person and the consequences of disability for her and to undertake activities that will help to support mental development and thus improve her quality of life.

Religious education is necessary to fully shape the child's personality. The family, as the basic educational environment, and also the sacramental character of marriage and parenthood, have the right to give an example of religious life. Parents using words and examples should be the first herald of faith for the child. They should introduce the child to the community of God's people. At the next stage, this task is entrusted also to teachers of religion who bring the child into the knowledge of God, introduce them to prayer, the Church's liturgy and the Christian vision of the world.

The problem of religious and moral awareness of a child with intellectual disability of a light level, undertaken in this dissertation, could be expressed by a question about the level of religious-moral messages of this group of people. The image of God functioning in the consciousness of the individual depends on the degree of mental development, emotional needs, and social and economic life conditions. Some progress has been observed in the development of the catechisation of people with intellectual disabilities. Overriding task of religious education of people with disabilities is to bring God closer and make it possible to establish personal contact with him, which at the same time is help in the comprehensive recognition of knowledge, perception of the world and the surrounding community.

Religious education is closely related to the faith and life of the Church. The catechization of special-care children is for spiritual and moral development. The task of special catechesis is to raise a child with a disability in the Catholic faith, gradually introducing him to the mystery of salvation and through the sacraments approaching Jesus Christ. Catechesis should pay attention to the social aspect and bring up not only to live in the Church but also outside it. It should prepare for everything that relies on Catholic faith and at the same time is necessary for living in a family and community in harmony with it, that is: respect for life, love of neighbor, respect for fathers and tradition. It should show how to live with dignity, for the benefit of themselves and others, how to decide correctly. Disabled children are specific recipients with limited cognitive abilities, forcing teachers of religion to develop appropriate, to their level, methods and tools.

In Poland, there are still relatively few papers dealing with the topic of religious education and the subject of the process of studying the religion of children with intellectual

disabilities with a light level. In connection with above, the aim of this doctoral thesis was to possibly describe wide and in-depth view of influence of religious education of children with light level of intellectual disabilities on solving psychosocial catechized problems. Achieving the described goal was possible due to the application of the qualitative research strategy by the author. Qualitative research creates the possibility of revealing complexity of processes and phenomena in their natural context. The technique of collecting data, in relation to religion teachers and parents of children with intellectual disabilities of a light degree, the Author made a narrative interview.

Conducted study and obtained results allowed the author of the dissertation to answer the following research problems: how is the level of religious messages of catechized children with intellectual disabilities of a light degree, what impact on their psychosocial development, how much supports their development and whether religious education has an impact on building sense of self-worth and dignity, allows decisions to be taken, consistent with the principles of Christian ethics in the light of not only the theory but also in the light of the statements of catechists and parents.

The obtained research material made it possible to present the discussed phenomenon in several areas: social, emotional and educational consequences of children with intellectual disabilities of a light degree. It inclined to reflect on religious and moral education of children and young people with special educational needs, on the level of their knowledge, on the consciousness of the values and faith of the contemporary, disabled young man.

The results of the research have shown that both parents and catechists see the supportive role of religious education on the general development of a child with intellectual disabilities of a light degree. They declare that the school, including religious education, develops various forms of moral evaluation in students with intellectual disabilities. It strengthens the moral-ethical and emotional development and at the same time strengthens desirable behaviors. Knowledge in the field of religious education strengthens positive interpersonal relationships and affects psychosocial development. It helps shape sensitivity, patience, nobility, goodness, and allows making accurate choices. It strengthens children with intellectual disability of a small degree in shaping desirable values, in socially acceptable behavior and in moral and ethical development.

Creating educational conditions for a child with moderate intellectual disability requires parents and teachers to be committed, patience and sacrifice. Parents declare that

for them an important source of support in the field of religious education could be pedagogues of religious education. School together with teachers undertakes activities to individualise and support the development of each student, according to their needs and capabilities. Parents and catechists notice only indirect influence of the parish, the Church on the development of moral education in children with intellectual disabilities of a light degree.

The adopted concept of the dissertation has a two-part system, theoretical and empirical. The whole is complemented by own research methodology. In the theoretical part, consisting of three chapters, Author showed the key aspects of disability, characteristic psychophysical, social and religious characteristics of the children of primary special schools. Author also signaled what are the tasks, programs for the catechisation of disabled children and the preparation of special catechists. The empirical part of the work as broadly and thoroughly describes the influence of religious education of children with disabilities of a light degree on solving psychosocial problems with whom catechists meets, what is the cooperation of catechists and parents of these children. At the end of the dissertation, based on the conducted research, Author of the dissertation presented important conclusions and pedagogical postulates.