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Introduction

The Directive of the Minister of National Education of 17 November 2010 on the rules of providing and organizing psychological and pedagogical assistance in public kindergartens, schools and institutions (published in the Law Gazette of 2010 No. 228, item 1487, p. 15706–15711) (RMEN-PPP) has been in force in an unchanged form in the Polish education system since 1st February 2011. It draws the attention of people engaged in the process of formal education to, among other things, the way of organizing psychological and pedagogical assistance in kindergartens and schools. RMEN-PPP defines the range of assistance and indicates which pupils require support due to their individual needs of development and education, and due to psychophysical possibilities.

The issue of learning difficulties has been the subject of analyses and practical activities conducted by Polish educators and psychologists (Bogdanowicz, 2004; Cieszyńska, 2005; Krasowicz-Kupis, 1999; Sochacka, 2004). The notion itself is not clearly defined. It is controversial due to its interdisciplinary character (Krasowicz-Kupis, Pietras, 2008) and the possibilities of approaching it from the point of view of diverse cognitive orientations (Półtorak, 2012, p. 46). However, the essential thing is to show the ways of psychological and pedagogical assistance to children who reveal different difficulties (Farnham-Diggory, 1992; Fisher, Cummings, 1993; Clayton, Morrison, 1995; Rayner, 2011; Jaszczyszyn, 2012). The mentioned directive

(RMEN-PPP) points to the causes of learning difficulties which result from: disability, social maladjustment, risks of social maladjustment, special talents, specific learning difficulties, linguistic communication disorders, chronic illness, experience of crisis and traumatic situations, educational failures, environment neglect connected with the living standard of the child and his/her family, ways of spending free time, contacts with different environments and adaptation difficulties conditioned by cultural differences or the change of education environment (including the change connected with prior education in a foreign country) (RMEN-PPP, §2.1).

Psychological and pedagogical assistance has been organized and provided in kindergartens since 1st September 2011 and in primary schools since 1st September 2012 according to the rules defined in the analyzed directive. It is worth familiarizing oneself with the document in order to initiate quick and effective procedures of supporting children with difficulties at the early stages of education.

Legal regulations in Poland define precisely the aims of psychological and pedagogical assistance, indicate the rules of receiving this kind of support and describe procedures. *The Directive of the Minister of National Education on the rules of providing and organizing psychological and pedagogical assistance in public kindergartens, schools and institutions* defines:

- Who and in what way can receive psychological and pedagogical assistance?
- Who, after recognizing an individual child's needs, should programme suitable support and plan appropriate forms of assistance?
- Who and in what way should organize psychological and pedagogical assistance?
- What forms of support are provided for by Polish legislation?

Groups of people entitled to receiving psychological and pedagogical assistance

It is worth emphasizing that the psychological and pedagogical assistance offered in the kindergarten or school is directed not only to children

but also to their parents and teachers, and receiving it is voluntary and free of charge (RMEN-PPP, §3). The assistance can be provided if it is requested by the pupil, his/her parent, teacher, a tutor of a childcare group or a specialist conducting classes with the pupil, a psychological and pedagogical clinic, including a specialist clinic, an assistant of Roma education or a teacher's assistant (RMEN-PPP, §5).

As regards parents and teachers, the assistance consists in supporting them in solving educational and teaching problems, and problems of educational abilities. The aim of such activities is to increase the effectiveness of psychological and pedagogical assistance provided to children (RMEN-PPP, §2.2).

People entitled to the provision of assistance

People entitled to the provision of assistance to children are “teachers, tutors of childcare groups or specialists in kindergartens, schools and institutions performing tasks in relation to psychological and pedagogical assistance, particularly psychologists, educators, speech therapists and career advisors” (RMEN-PPP, §4.2, p. 15706).

Their pedagogic activities serve two aims.

- The first of these is connected with recognizing “individual developmental and educational needs and psychophysical possibilities of pupils, including those who are particularly talented, and planning the ways of satisfying the needs” (RMEN-PPP, §18.1 item 1, p. 15708).

As regards the kindergarten, pedagogic activities consist of conducting pedagogic observation, which results in an analysis and diagnosis of the child's readiness to attend school. The gathered information is of help to parents in recognizing the state of readiness of their child to start education at primary school, and to the kindergarten teacher in designing an individual programme of supporting and correcting the development of the child.

Observations and pedagogic measurements are to be carried out in I–III classes. They aim to recognize in pupils the risk of the occurrence of specific learning difficulties (RMEN-PPP, §18.1 item 1).

These diagnostic requirements defined by RMEN-PPP result from the fact that the symptoms of developmental dissonances and abnormalities in the functioning of individual analyzers are noticed even in young children. An early diagnosis and appropriate preventive-therapeutic measures can remove or reduce them (Walkowiak, 2011, p. 125–126).

- The second aim of pedagogic activities indicates the need to identify interests and talents of pupils who are specially gifted and to plan appropriate support (RMEN-PPP, §18.1 item 2).

In this variant it is important to stimulate pupils' creative activity and to ensure them the best possible conditions to develop their abilities and interests.

The organization of assistance provided to pupils

In kindergartens and schools the organizer of assistance is the head teacher of the institution (RMEN-PPP, §4.1). He/she initiates the assistance in cooperation with "pupils' parents, psychological and pedagogical clinics (including specialist clinics), teachers' training centres, other kindergartens, schools and institutions, non-government organizations and other institutions working on behalf of the family, children and young people" (RMEN-PPP, §4.3, p. 15706).

However, it should be mentioned that "the current monitoring of pupils' school achievements is one of the important tasks of every teacher. It is a source of information about the pupil's development, pace and effectiveness of acquiring knowledge and abilities defined in the curriculum, and about problems and difficulties which can appear in the course of acquiring them. (...) Any symptoms of appearing difficulties that are noticed by the teacher helps to take decisions about the necessity of

including the child in a widened specialist diagnosis in the psychological and pedagogical clinic, which provides a basis for the further directing of education and, if necessary, therapy for the child" (Póltorak, 2012, p. 61).

If it is ascertained that a child, as a result of developmental and educational needs, requires psychological and pedagogical assistance, then the person noticing the difficulties should immediately inform the head teacher of the kindergarten or school about it. After receiving a signal from a teacher about the need of assistance or submitting a certificate or opinion (a certificate of the need of individual obligatory kindergarten preparation, or a certificate of the need of individual teaching, or an opinion of a specialist clinic), the head teacher of the institution should immediately form a team and appoint a person coordinating work (RMEN-PPP, §19.2).

As regards children with recognized interests and talents, including specially gifted children who do not have a certificate or opinion, the head teacher should immediately form a team after receiving information from a teacher, a tutor of a childcare group or a specialist. Information on the need to support such a child is sufficient for the head teacher to take action.

The team, engaged in planning and coordinating psychological and pedagogical activities, consists of teachers, tutors of a childcare group and specialists who conduct classes with the child (RMEN-PPP, §19.1). Moreover, if it is necessary, parents, psychological and pedagogical clinics, including specialist clinics, teacher training centres, other kindergartens, schools, non-governmental organizations and other institutions working on behalf of the family, children and young people, should be invited to cooperate (RMEN-PPP, §22.3). The cooperation of different institutions on behalf of the child can definitely increase the effectiveness of the psychological and pedagogical assistance provided in kindergartens and schools.

The tasks of the team include:

- determining the range of psychological and pedagogical assistance that the child requires,

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- defining the recommended forms, ways and time of assistance,
 - considering information and guidelines for activities contained in the issued documents, such as a certificate or opinion if the child has any.

When beginning its work, it is important for the team to recognize the current situation of the pupil and issue a card of pupil's individual needs. It is important to know if the child already had a card of pupil's individual needs at an earlier stage of education because on the basis of the information contained in the card, the team can define the recommended forms, ways and time of assistance to the child (RMEN-PPP, §20.2). After the completion of education, the card is given to the parents and with their consent the school can send a copy to the next school.

The head teacher considering the recommendations of the team "determines for the pupil the forms, ways and period of psychological and pedagogical assistance and the amount of the time for each form of assistance" (RMEN-PPP, §21.1, p. 15708). The pupil's parents are immediately informed in writing about the decisions.

The team designs a plan of supporting activities (PDW) for the pupil based on the decisions made by the head teacher. The plan should take into consideration:

- goals to be achieved in the area in which the child needs assistance,
- performed activities,
- work methods,
- the extent of adjusting educational requirements arising from the curriculum to individual developmental and educational needs and psychophysical possibilities (The Directive of the Minister of National Education of 17th November 2010 on the conditions and ways of assessing, classifying and promoting pupils and students, and setting tests and examinations in public schools (Law Gazette No. 228, item 1491 of 2nd December 2010) (RMEN-OKP),

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- activities supporting a child's parents,
 - the extent of cooperation with specialist clinics, teachers training centres, non-government organizations and other institutions working on behalf of the family, children and young people (RMEN-PPP, §22.1).

The team issues a card (KIPU) and retains it (RMEN-PPP, §27.1). It also makes an assessment of the effectiveness of assistance provided to the child, including a given form of assistance after having finished providing it, and the assistance provided in a defined school year. It is possible to make an earlier assessment of the effectiveness of the form of work with the child. An application in this matter can be submitted by a pupil's parent or a teacher conducting compensatory classes or specialist classes. In both variants the team making an assessment formulates conclusions and guidelines concerning further work with the pupil (including the recommended forms, ways and period of providing further pedagogical and psychological assistance to the pupil (RMEN-PPP, §23.3). It should be emphasized that the head of the institution considering the assessment made by the team can decide to shorten the period of providing assistance to the pupil; that is, of finishing it earlier.

Therefore, an earlier diagnosis and properly organized pedagogical intervention is of key importance for properly organized pedagogical and psychological assistance in public kindergartens and I–III classes of primary school.

Forms of assistance in the kindergarten and in the school

On the kindergarten and school premises, the assistance is offered by teachers, tutors of childcare groups and specialists in the form of counselling, workshops and trainings. Pupils participate in counselling, and parents and teachers in counselling, workshops and training (RMEN-PPP, §6.1. item 6, §6.2. item 2 and §6.4).

**Table 1. Forms of psychological and pedagogical assistance
in the kindergarten and school**

Kindergarten	School
1. Specialist classes: Corrective-compensatory Speech therapy Socio-therapeutic Other therapy classes	1. Specialist classes: Corrective-compensatory Speech therapy Socio-therapeutic Other therapy classes
2. Counselling	2. Counselling
	3. Compensatory classes
	4. Classes developing talents
	5. Classes of therapy

The authors' own study is based on the Directive of the Minister of National Education on the rules of providing and organizing psychological and pedagogical assistance in public kindergartens, schools and centres of the 17th November 2010 (§6.1 and §6.2).

Specialist classes (see table 1) should be organized for children who have a certificate or an opinion, or their needs of psychological and pedagogical assistance have been recognized by the teacher. The organization of classes for talented children in both kindergartens and schools is recommended. All kinds of classes should be conducted only by teachers and specialists holding proper qualifications (RMEN-PPP, §6.1–3, §14).

Compensatory classes are aimed at improving disordered functions and supporting well developed functions which can support disordered functions or replace them if necessary. The classes are organized for pupils with developmental disorders and aberrations or specific learning difficulties. The number of participants in the classes should be 5 (RMEN-PPP, §10). "Compensatory work is a conscious and responsible activity for overcoming the state of both disharmonious development and its consequences in the form of specific learning difficulties and pupils' behaviour (Jastrzb, Baczaa, 2011, p. 25).

Speech therapy classes are organized "for pupils with speech disorders, which cause disturbance of linguistic communication and make learning difficult. The number of participants of the classes is up to 4. (...) Socio-therapeutic classes and other classes of a therapeutic character are organized for pupils with dysfunctions and disorders hindering their social functioning. The number of participants of the classes is up to 10." (RMEN-PPP, §11 and §12).

Compensatory classes are directed to less talented children and those who have been neglected in terms of environment and/or education. They are attended by pupils with learning difficulties and particularly pupils with difficulties in fulfilling the educational requirements arising from the programme basis of general education. The number of participants of the classes is up to 8 (RMEN-PPP, §9).

Classes for developing talents can be organized on the school premises. They are created for particularly talented pupils and are conducted with the use of active methods of teaching. The number of participants of the classes is up to 8 (RMEN-PPP, §8).

The time of duration of the above mentioned classes varies. One unit of specialist classes is a maximum of 60 minutes per week, and compensatory and developing talents classes are up to 45 minutes.

For pupils who are revealing homogeneous or doubling disorders which means that it is necessary to adjust the education organization and process to their specific educational needs and long-term specialist assistance, therapy classes can be organized. The number of participants is up to 15 (RMEN-PPP, §7.1).

The current changes in the Polish education system and in some legislative regulations are connected with the organization of assistance and the use of the described forms of assistance near the child, in his/her natural kindergarten or school space. It is heartening that recently the awareness of educational circles and parents has increased considerably (Cooper-Kahn, Dietzel, 2008; Dąbrowska, 2008, 2009). But until 2008 one of the main difficulties of early diagnosis was the lack of comprehensive tools. Nowadays such tools exist. They are designed to be used by school specialists, speech therapists, psychologists and educators. While hints,

suggestions and designed materials which facilitate an early determining of a child's problem can be found by all teachers in the specialist literature (Hatcher et al., 2006; Blair, Rupley, Nichols, 2007; Cameron et al., 2008; Dawson, Guare, 2009; Jaszczyszyn, 2009, 2010; Mercer, Mercer, Pullen, 2010) and specialist web pages.



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Abstract:

New legal regulations in Poland provide for the need of earlier diagnosis and intervention. The regulations refer to two different diagnoses, i.e. a teachers' diagnosis and that of the specialist (clinical). The teachers' diagnosis (of the kindergarten and school) results from the process of recognizing and assessing a child's problems. While the specialist (clinical) diagnosis is carried out at the psychological and pedagogical clinic. Both forms complement each other. A preliminary

assessment of the lack of readiness to attend school and the risk of specific learning difficulties should be made as early as at the preschool stage within the teachers' diagnosis.

The discussed directive (RMEN-PPP) imposes an obligation on the kindergarten and the school and makes the institutions responsible for recognizing children's difficulties and providing them with assistance. However, if the assistance is to be effective, the mentioned centres should cooperate with parents and specialists from the clinic.

Keywords: learning difficulties, psychological and pedagogical assistance, legal regulations of assistance to children

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