

## Article

# The Voices of Autistic Adolescents on Diversity, Education and School Learning in Poland

Sabina Pawlik <sup>1</sup>, Jolanta Rzeźnicka-Krupa <sup>2</sup>, Marcin Gierczyk <sup>1,\*</sup> and Garry Hornby <sup>1,3</sup><sup>1</sup> Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Silesia, 40-007 Katowice, Poland<sup>2</sup> Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Gdansk, 80-309 Gdańsk, Poland<sup>3</sup> Institute of Education, University of Plymouth, Plymouth PL4 8AA, UK

\* Correspondence: marcin.gierczyk@us.edu.pl

**Abstract:** This article presents qualitative research results on the education of students who are on the autistic spectrum (ASD) in Poland, viewed from their own perspectives and analyzed within the conditions of the Polish education system. This research is theoretically based on sociology of education, pedagogy and disability studies assumptions. The main goal of this study was to explore the educational experiences and needs of pupils, and to recognize the most significant barriers and facilitators of educational change as formulated by teenagers who identify as self-advocates and are involved in non-governmental organizations' activism. The primary research method was desk-based research and qualitative content analysis. The analysis of the research material allowed the reconstruction of the educational experiences of adolescents with ASD related to social relations, the sensory environment, school learning and teachers' attitudes towards students as the most important barriers to achieving equal access to education.

**Keywords:** autistic spectrum; self-advocacy; diversity; education; qualitative research



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## 1. Introduction

Education is a very broad and ambiguous concept. It not only refers to the processes of cognition, acquisition of competences and skills, and learning, but is also a process deeply immersed in social life and culture, and is therefore never politically neutral. It can reinforce, reproduce and perpetuate existing social structures and dominant values, thus contributing to the perpetuation of inequalities and exclusions [1]. However, it can also provide a platform for critical reflection on reality and a tool for triggering social changes [2,3], which will allow negative phenomena to be offset and make the world around us a more welcoming and inclusive place for all [4]. School and school education can be seen as an institutional metaphor for society, a kind of social micro-world; therefore, school is not only a place for acquiring knowledge, but also, above all, a place where young people shape their own identity, learn interpersonal relations and commit to the common good. Therefore, an important question about education is always the question about the world in which we want to live. In the case of students with diverse educational needs, it is important to design education in such a manner that, regardless of their state of functioning, they can participate in it with equal rights and equal access.

In Poland, the first schools for students with disabilities were established at the beginning of the 19th century, and the development of education in different parts of the country proceeded differently because the country was under the partition of three other states (Prussia, Russia and Austria). After regaining independence in 1918, education issues were, for the first time, comprehensively regulated by the Law on the System of Education of 1932, according to which the education of children and young people with disabilities was carried out in special institutions and schools or special departments in mainstream schools, which was, however, rarely practiced. Changes in education were

accompanied, in the period between World War I and World War II, by the intensive development of teacher training for special education and the development of research within a new scientific discipline—special pedagogy [5]. In the period from 1945 to 1989, the education of students with disabilities was primarily segregated and provided within a separate, parallel system of special education (kindergartens, schools of various levels and special educational centers), which was tailored to the needs of students depending on the type of disability. It was only after the collapse of the Communist Bloc countries in Eastern Europe and the political transformation after 1989, when the regime changed to liberal democracy, that the legal basis for the organization of inclusive education was created [6–8].

The first official changes in education that enabled students with disabilities to attend mainstream schools and kindergartens were introduced by the 1991 law reforming the entire school system [5]. The final shape of its provisions was significantly influenced by international documents referring to the idea of civil rights, equal opportunities and social integration of people with disabilities, such as *Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities* [9], *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education* [10] and *Improving the quality of life of people with disabilities: enhancing a coherent policy for and through full participation* [11]. The law, while preserving existing special education facilities, also introduced the possibility of creating inclusive classes attended by children with disabilities as well as typically developing children. Such classes, called integrative, are taught by two teachers and continue to function to the present day, while the number of students with disabilities is steadily increasing in mainstream schools.

With Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004 and ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2012, there have been intensive changes in various areas of social life, including in education. These are the result of the gradual implementation of demands related to equal access and inclusion of people with disabilities. Since 2011, Poland has also been a member of the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education and regularly publishes detailed reports on the education of students with diverse educational needs at various stages of education. According to the latest data from the 2019/2020 school year, the enrollment rate of learners with official certification of special educational needs in mainstream education is almost 84 percent at pre-primary level and 66 percent at secondary level [12,13].

Currently, the Polish education system gives students with disabilities and their parents a choice regarding the form and place of education, which can be special education in separate institutions, special education in integrative classes operating in mainstream schools or inclusive education, which takes into account the postulate of “a school for all students” [14,15]. The most recent changes to the education system involve the introduction of the inclusive education model and its tenets [16,17]. In a pilot project implemented by the Ministry of Education and Science, selected special education institutions are to serve as centers to support schools in working with students with diverse learning needs [18]. In the Strategy for Persons with Disabilities adopted by the Polish government in 2021, the implementation of Article 24 of the Convention [19] and the development of an inclusive education system are listed among the priority areas of public policy making for the next decade.

Contemplating education in the context of human rights draws attention to the many factors that can marginalize students who, for different reasons (e.g., disabilities), function in non-standard ways. Rioux [20] points out that the issue of access is not a sufficient condition for the realization of the equal right to education; it also depends on many other social, economic and environmental factors. That is why it is important to link education and pedagogical research with the discourse of human rights, civil rights, anti-discrimination and exclusion and the idea of social justice. One of the most important documents outlining international arrangements globally and guiding the actions of many countries in realizing the rights and inclusion of people with various disabilities is the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) adopted by member states in 2006 [21].

The preamble of the convention clearly emphasizes the need for:

“(v) Recognizing the importance of accessibility to the physical, social, economic and cultural environment, to health and education and to information and communication; (n) recognizing the importance for persons with disabilities of their individual autonomy and independence, including the freedom to make their own choices; (o) considering that persons with disabilities should have the opportunity to be actively involved in decision-making processes about policies and programmes, including those directly concerning them” [21].

In turn, Article 24 of the UNCRPD, which deals with anti-discrimination in the field of education for persons with disabilities, states that the best form of realizing the equal right to education of persons with different levels of functioning and needs, as well as inclusion in active participation in society, is an “inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning” [21]. Inclusive education is seen not only as a pedagogical practice, but also as a strategy of action and a manner of realizing the idea of building an inclusive society in the spirit of human and civil rights discourse [22]. Considering the recommendations that stem from the content of the convention, which Poland ratified in 2012 [19], it is extremely important to take into account the voices of the main subjects of educational and inclusive processes, i.e., students with diverse educational needs, in all activities undertaken in the field of education. The analysis of the educational experiences of children and young people as seen from their own perspective and described in their own language has thus far rarely been addressed in research, which focuses primarily on issues of educational policy change and the adaptation of educational processes and the functioning of school institutions, as well as on actions taken by teachers and educational agencies. Rarely, on the other hand, are there studies exploring the voice of students themselves and their own perspective of understanding what education is and what it should look like socially and culturally [23,24]. Therefore, in the research presented in this article, we present an analysis of the voices of young self-advocates, i.e., teenagers on the autistic spectrum, who are active in non-governmental organizations in Poland, fighting for the rights of persons with disabilities and the implementation of the UNCRPD in this area.

Davis and Watson [23] highlight the lack of inclusion research in education in which students with disabilities are treated as full and important actors in society and their own perspectives of different educational settings are taken into account. Yet, according to the authors, “... full inclusion is only likely to be achieved when policy decisions are built on disabled children’s own lived experiences as articulated directly to policy makers or as collected within empirical studies” [23] (p. 678). We see research into the voices of students with disabilities identifying themselves as self-advocates working for educational change as a form of social activism and fighting for the rights of students with different types of disabilities to develop and receive a quality education. Educational activism can manifest itself at different levels and involve different actors involved in education: students, parents, teachers and school administration, social organizations of the non-governmental sector. What unites them is a common goal—to fight for quality education for all students and the realization of equal access and the right to education for marginalized and excluded groups. Undertaking self-advocacy and activism is itself educative [25], and researchers are increasingly drawing attention to the need for a framework for developing engagement in activism among different groups of students, including students on the autistic spectrum [26].

The concept of “scholar activist”, as Stanton-Salazar writes:

“Represent a large and influential cadre of scholars who continue to push the boundaries of social justice research and scholarship in the field of education. The work of this larger community of scholars is both ontologically and epistemologically diverse; that is, notable variations exist in theoretical perspective, research methodology, the role of research participants and the nature of their knowledge [27]”.

We share the belief that “scholar-activists in the area of public education embrace their integral role in understanding, critiquing, and ultimately changing the multiple axes of oppression as they operate within the public school system” [27]. In addition, knowledge of how school and educational practices are perceived by students on the autistic spectrum and how they may negatively shape their self-perception and self-esteem is highly relevant to their well-being, development and education [28,29].

In the research presented here, we reconstruct the meanings and values given to education by young self-advocates, as well as their educational experiences and the changes in education advocated by the young people to make it more responsive to their needs. Learning about and empowering the voices of students on the autistic spectrum in the educational research domain will allow us to formulate more adequate projects for creating diverse school communities and an inclusive education system, not only in Poland, but also in other countries.

### *Aim*

The aim of this research was to explore educational experiences and identify educational barriers and desired changes from the perspective of young self-advocates on the autistic spectrum—members of the Conscious Youth Club at the Autism Team Foundation in Łódź. The main research problem concerned the educational experiences of the participants that shaped their evaluation of the education system and the changes they consider necessary in order to fully benefit from school education.

In the course of the research, we sought answers to the following specific questions:

- How do students on the autistic spectrum perceive their own education?
- What experiences shape their evaluation of the education system and the realization of their right to education?
- How do they understand “good” and “bad” education in the context of their diverse needs?
- What changes do they need, what do they expect and what actions do they take to fight for their rights?
- What, in their opinion, supports and what hinders the realization of the goals of inclusive education and the social integration of persons on the autistic spectrum in the context of the functioning of the education system in Poland?

## **2. Methods**

The theoretical and methodological basis for this research is based on the principles of sociology of education, pedagogy and disability studies, in line with our shared belief that learning processes are socially, economically and culturally determined. They should therefore not be considered solely from the perspective of individual conditions and adjustments and aspects of the school environment, but must also take into account wider issues of inequality, oppression and exclusion and the research practices that oppose them, thereby aiming at the presentation of the student voice, empowerment and emancipation of marginalized groups [30–32].

Given the purpose and nature of the research questions, the research was embedded in a qualitative research approach [33,34]. The primary method of research and empirical data collection was desk-based research [35]. Research material in the form of texts and audiovisual recordings was collected online, on websites and social networks. The data came from self-administered posts and audiovisual materials posted online. They are subjective and qualitative in nature.

They are public data sourced from:

1. Lessons in Diversity—audiovisual material posted on the YouTube channel of the Autism Team Foundation from Łódź (<https://www.youtube.com/@FundacjaAutismTeam>, accessed on 30 November 2022), produced in April 2021 as part of a social campaign to mark World Autism Awareness Day, which is a recording of a conversation with students on the autistic spectrum from the Autism Team Foundation’s Aware Youth Club.

2. Conscious Youth Club pages on social media (<https://www.facebook.com/klubswiadomejmlodzielodz>, accessed on 30 November 2022).

The Conscious Youth Club was established in January 2020 at the Autism Team Foundation in Łódź. Its members are young people on the autistic spectrum who act together on important issues for themselves and their environment. Members of the Conscious Youth Club are active in many fields; they publish on social media, support other young activists with autism throughout Poland, organize meetings and workshops in museums, libraries and offices, and give lectures at conferences. An important area of their activity is the commitment to improving the educational situation of students on the autistic spectrum. They are active in this area by attempting to influence educational policy by writing letters to successive ministers of education in Poland (e.g., a letter on the difficult situation of children with disabilities during remote education caused by the COVID-19 epidemic; a letter with five demands concerning “autism-friendly schools”) and by actively participating in meetings of the Inclusive Education Team established on the initiative of the Ombudsman. They are also active in local school and classroom environments, organizing “Diversity Lessons” and intervening in situations of violation of children’s and students’ rights.

### Analysis

The analysis of the collected research material in the form of data selection, ordering and coding allowed the main research categories to be distinguished [35–37]. The data analysis process took place in two stages. In stage one, all researchers, after an initial familiarization with the data, coded the collected data line by line. The research team then met to reach a consensus on the themes through discussion and to agree on the final wording. As a result of the two-stage data analysis process, four overarching themes were identified, forming the main research finding categories [38].

### 3. Results

The results that emerged from the analysis of the collected material and the ordering and coding of the data in the four categories are synthesized in Table 1 [35].

**Table 1.** Summary of main categories of themes that emerged from the analysis.

Main Categories and Subcategories		Codes
a. With peers b. With teachers	Relations in education:	Verbal abuse by peers; Feelings of otherness, fear and rejection; Teachers as allies and a source of support; Lack of understanding and consideration of the needs, knowledge and competencies of students with ASD;
		Feeling of being treated unfairly, lack of relationship to peer violence; Verbal abuse and passive aggression by teachers, use of punishment.
School sensory environment		Noise and excess of other stimuli; The need to shelter and hide; Lack of understanding of sensory overload and pupils’ needs.
Teaching and learning		Inadequate teaching and learning practices, lack of integration of content and needed adaptations; Underestimation and lack of reference to the knowledge and competence of students with ASD.
Activism and self-advocacy		Acceptance, appreciation and recognition of diversity as a value; Respect for human rights, gender equality; Recognition of students’ subjectivity, their right to speak up and make decisions on their own issues; Being tired of adults who “know better”; The need for attention, listening and conversation.

Below is a more detailed, in-depth description of the categories that emerged from the analysis process, referring directly to statements taken from the research material.

### 3.1. Relationships with Peers

Lack of satisfying relationships with peers at school was one of the most recurring themes in the statements of the self-advocates on the autistic spectrum that we studied. They often experienced rejection from schoolmates. They were also accompanied by feelings of being different, alien and incompatible with the rest of the group. In the sources analyzed, we can read, for example, such statements by teenage girls:

“At school always, e.g., at PE classes, nobody ever wanted to pick me for the team to play, I was always last or not accepted to play at all”.

“At school I was definitely different to most people, I was afraid to talk to other children, I got along with the janitor lady sooner than with other people”.

Pupils on the autistic spectrum also acknowledged that during their schooling, they experienced verbal or physical violence from peers aimed directly at them and motivated by other pupils’ perceptions of them as different and non-normative.

“In primary school I was beaten by a top student with her friends in the bathroom”.

“More than once I met with students who, who just said: what are you doing, what are you doing here? You are abnormal”.

They also experienced various forms of abuse from peers, such as being prompted to say or do something inappropriate, which they commented on as follows:

“Some people knew, however, that I didn’t understand the concept of secrecy and they questioned me about things and then they were talking behind my back”.

“A lot of people loved to take advantage of me and if I didn’t do something they wanted me to do (e.g., I didn’t give them money for beer, etc.) I was either beaten up or they made up that I had beaten them up”.

In this type of situation, young people ask teachers to react when someone is hurt and, at the same time, point out how important the behavior of teaching staff is in general, as expressed in the statement:

“A teacher should have the courage to speak loudly—both when good things happen—in which case he or she should praise and appreciate—and when someone experiences evil before his or her eyes”.

For pupils with ASD, it is also important that teachers, by their actions, “familiarize” other pupils with the different developmental pathway that is consistent with the autistic spectrum:

“During the first classes of the school, conduct a parenting lesson so that the pupils, together with the teacher, can familiarise themselves with the autistic spectrum of the respective pupil in the class”.

“The most important thing is to make other students and their parents aware of neurodiversity”.

### 3.2. Relationships with Teachers

In the self-advocates’ statements, relationships with teachers varied widely and were generally more rewarding than peer relationships. Pupils on the autistic spectrum were often able to find an ally in the teacher—someone who can understand their needs and respond positively to them:

“My favourite teacher is maths teacher Mrs J from primary school, even though I don’t like maths. She was able to find something in me that other teachers couldn’t. She didn’t score me out, she just looked for a way to help me”.



The teacher is also portrayed as someone who is interested in the student's world, for whom their passions and interests are important, as shown in the following statement:

"The physics teacher is okay. I like the man. He makes me forget that he is a teacher. We do important talks in this class and they are often not about physics but about me. About my passion for insects and skateboards".

It is often the teacher who becomes the significant person who, by reinforcing the students' strengths, influences their further life choices:

"I owe a lot to Mrs. J., the Polish teacher. Mrs. J. thought I had talent, although she did not spare any criticism. But the criticism was positive, in a good way, she NEVER ridiculed me in front of the class . . . Out of all the ideas and stories that swarmed in my head, out of those dreams of adventures I had read so much about, the idea of writing a book was born. I wrote, I plotted. After the summer holidays, I bragged about it at school. My friends were curious, Mrs J was delighted . . . She made sure that what I was creating made sense and could be enjoyed. It was she who made sure that I did not deviate from the path of creativity, that I did not give up my talent despite the adversities I had to face in my adult life".

The self-advocates also have positive memories of co-organizing (support) teachers who made them feel safe at school and allowed them to participate fully in the life of the classroom:

"It wasn't until I got Mrs W, a support teacher, that I felt safe at school".

"I had a wonderful support teacher—Mrs I—who I even went on trips with and my mum didn't have to go with me".

Unfortunately, not all students' experiences of relationships established with teachers were positive. Self-advocates cited a number of situations in which inappropriate behavior and abuse took place on the part of educators in the form of:

- *Ignoring, ridiculing and insulting students on the autistic spectrum:* "Not involving me in any major issue or even keeping quiet, avoiding my person or throwing all sorts of nasty slogans in the air like "What does she look like?""
- *Punishment, e.g., by giving low marks:* "I had marks put in the class register for no reason, even for someone beating me up and there was proof, or for not being at school on certain days and having a solid excuse from my parents and doctor".
- *Threatening and using a raised voice:* "She would even snatch my pen out of my hand because she didn't like it and for me to write with her pen because she "just wanted". She shouted at me a lot, threatened to beat me up many times, etc".
- *Lack of understanding of the needs of the student:* "Generally, it was bad. I used to go in normally because there was a damaged locker that you could go into. I would go in there and lock myself in . . . and I had a punishment anyway. For sitting in the locker because there was overstimulation and stress".
- *Abuse of power:* "One high school maths teacher forced me to change my maths school leaving examination level from extended to basic".

From the empirical evidence gathered, it appears that many teachers understand the needs of students on the autistic spectrum, are able to find their strengths and are able to motivate, support and encourage their involvement appropriately while avoiding undue pressure. However, there are also situations where a teacher becomes a source of stress for the student and even abuses his or her position with verbal abuse.

### 3.3. School Sensory Environment

The self-advocates' statements analyzed indicate that the schools they attended were places of sensory stress for them. Most frequently, students complained about the noise in the school corridors during breaks between classes and the loud sound of school bells.

Pupils with ASD commented on this type of experience as very stressful, as school noise triggers strong negative emotions in them and is even painfully felt throughout the body:

“I really hated the noise at break time, I would look at where to hide e.g., bathroom etc. not to hear that noise so much”.

“The hardest part is surviving the break. It’s a long time without a plan and the noise is such that my brain swells in my head”.

“I hate that loud bell, when it rings my whole body hurts inside, I can feel it drilling into my head. It’s a big stress for me, my stomach hurts and my legs and arms get stiff. The worst part is the waiting . . . when it rings—it’s such an accumulation of anxiety and anger. When the sound passes I come back to life, but I’m totally exhausted”.

One aspect of the stressful sensory environment that young people point to in their statements is teachers speaking in a raised voice or even shouting. An experience was recalled by one student:

“I really hated it when she shouted, she had a very high and loud voice, I couldn’t stand it when she shouted and I used to plug my ears all the time”.

“Teachers, please: do not shout or use aggression if a pupil does not understand something and, for example, asks for it to be repeated. Shouting has quite the opposite effect on such people and makes them completely uninterested in school, learning, etc”.

Persons on the autistic spectrum mentioned that their sensory needs were not only not met in the school environment, but also ignored, and that attempts to seek “sensory balance” on their own were met with a lack of understanding by teachers. Pupils talking about their experiences of needing to hide and shelter mentioned such reactions from teachers:

“I hide under the stairs. I have my own place. ‘Get out immediately’ they often say”.

“The teachers didn’t understand that these were noise-cancelling headphones . . . they told me to take them off, that they were music headphones and things like that”.

Because of their many difficult experiences in this area, self-advocates are pushing hard for a ‘sensory-friendly school’, where awareness of their specific sensory needs is built and action is taken to meet them by formulating demands:

“We are calling for a school . . . where soundproofing rooms will be a standard, not a fad”.

“We want the school to be a welcoming place for all of us, where diversity will be accepted, where each of us will find a comfort zone to return to the next day”.

### 3.4. Teaching and Learning

Self-advocates on the autistic spectrum pay much attention to the learning process. The most important theme they take up in the materials analyzed concerns the use of special interests in education. The young activists we surveyed prefer to call their special interests a passion. This term seems more universal and not directly related to the autistic spectrum. According to them, using passion in education has a motivational and empowering function:

“It will be nice if our teachers appreciate our passions and use them in learning in different ways. It’s a strong motivation for us to work”.

“It strengthens me when you notice my passions”.

The teacher’s recognition of the interests and talents of a pupil on the autistic spectrum can become the basis for his or her development. It boosts self-esteem and motivation,



becomes an incentive to work and allows the pupil to develop “drive” for the future. One student talked about the importance of this aspect of schooling:

“Mrs M. discovered that I see something more in books, that this is my passion, my life, my inspiration. That’s why she was so dedicated to finding me better, more interesting and more grown-up books. She quickly realised that I read faster than other children and she would find me books that she thought would be suitable for me and that I would enjoy”.

Another important theme raised by the self-advocates, which is related to the learning process, concerns the low usefulness and lack of practicality of the knowledge they acquired at school. One young person viewed his education in this way:

“First of all, I feel very negative about the whole education system. I concluded a very long time ago that this system we have is basically impractical. There is a lot of stuff that is useless in my life. I lack life’s practical content . . . Why do I need to know this? About Hector and Achilles precisely because he was some kind of god just there, instead of, for example, writing a CV”.

In their statements, pupils with ASD questioned the traditional way of teaching, which was mainly oriented towards the transmission of standardized knowledge according to the current curriculum. They also pointed out that their abilities and skills often fell short of the expectations of the education system or even that they were required to have skills that they cannot master.

“I have, unfortunately, dysgraphia, just my handwriting is illegible, I can’t even read it myself, and yet the teachers say go on, just sort of telling me to write”.

“A: And tell me, have you ever felt that you were unfairly graded?”

“B: When the teacher gave me an outline map. I have dysgraphia and he told me to mark a specific place on the map”.

Importantly, students highlight the inadequacy of teaching and learning approaches not only in relation to their own differentiated needs, but also when referring to the overall evaluation of schooling.

“You can meet nice teachers in school, but unfortunately teachers sometimes, like most people, think in stereotypes—they stick to an old system that no longer works, has become invalid, doesn’t work”.

“In mass schools, for the most part . . . unnecessary schemas are being taught”.

From their statements, it can be concluded that the school did not provide them with an appropriate educational environment that took into account their needs and abilities, which, in effect, prevented them from achieving educational success.

### 3.5. Activism and Self-Advocacy

Referring to their own self-advocacy activities, many students with ASD believed that a key issue in the educational process is the acceptance and appreciation of diversity, recognizing it as a value. This is evidenced by statements such as:

“Pupils in the autistic spectrum want their neurodiversity not to be treated as a defect requiring reprimand and constant striving for improvement”.

“We children and young people on the autistic spectrum want to tell the whole world that diversity is important and needed”.

“The student as a human being is defined by their inalienable right to have their humanity respected, the right to accept their differences—that is Diversity”.

Students were aware that the organization of all educational activities should be based on equal access and equal treatment of all students in the spirit of human and children’s

rights. They therefore formulated important guidelines for teachers and school staff and, in a broader context, also for society:

“Don’t treat people on the spectrum like people with other disorders or illnesses as inferior. These are the same people as any of us. Just because someone was born on the autistic spectrum doesn’t mean they are inferior. There are times when we need more support and help than others. But that doesn’t mean that people on the spectrum are inferior. They are never inferior/worse, they are just of a different character, different tastes etc. And that does not mean the word bad. The word “different” does not mean “bad”. And I say this sincerely as a person with an autistic spectrum diagnosis and a self-advocate”.

In their demands, they also address all students, drawing attention to very important issues related to the realization of the right to education:

“I wish all students, especially students developing on the autistic spectrum, that respecting their right to education with respect for their humanity is a standard and not a privilege that must be earned”.

An issue to which the young activists paid a lot of attention is the issue of recognizing people on the autistic spectrum, including children and young people, as conscious entities who have the right to speak out on their own issues and make decisions about their lives and education. Often, due to certain difficulties and limitations, pupils with diverse needs are seen as incapable of certain activities, with limited abilities and competences. One pupil put it this way:

“We hear, feel and understand everything . . . even if we don’t seem capable of it. That’s what always surprises us the most, that adults don’t get that their bad words stay with us”.

“Self-advocates want to participate fully in the education process and all decisions made by adults that affect them. They want their voices to be heard and taken seriously, with the attention they deserve”.

“In relation to Autism Awareness Month, I would like to say together with my divers friends that our voice is important. We want to speak, to express what we feel and what we need and what is important to us. The world does not always allow us to do this. Too often the world knows for us what we want and need. We want to change that”.

“Autism Awareness Day is the kind of day when students on the autistic spectrum want to speak out, first and foremost, about their right to humanity and to be treated with respect at school too—and not about their deficits, which are very often pointed out to them at school level”.

“Speaker 3: Would you like teachers to know about our passions?

Speaker 4: Yes, so that they also know that they can also be young self-advocates’.

Speaker 3: And for them to take it seriously?

Speaker 4: Yes, so that it is for real and not with doubt”.

They emphasized being fed up with the world of adults, including teachers, who very often knew better than they did about what young people need, what they should be doing and how they should be living and being educated.

“And there comes a moment when I switch off—no more cooperation with the adult world of the wise. I am tired of you guys. With your doubt in me and another idea ‘for my socialization’”.

“Don’t think stereotypically, don’t think stereotypically, talk to autistic people talk to their parents”.

“There is often a lack of conversation at school, I mean the one with real and attentive listening. I have a lot to say but few opportunities to express it in my own way. I’m tired of people telling me what to do to be like everyone else. I don’t want to be like everyone else. I can’t even imagine it. It’s then I disappear into myself and I’m gone”.

The young people emphasized how important it is for them to be treated subjectively and not to limit their lives primarily to therapy to “fix” what is not working as it should. This is evidenced by the following statements:

“We, young people on the autistic spectrum, call for the vigilance of all those who support us—we are a partner in this journey—we are not just an object of therapy”.

“Ask our opinion always and in every situation. We are not just objects for therapy, we need wise, healthy partnership relations that support us, strengthen us, not fix us”.

“We need to know and get to know your ideas on how to support us and most importantly we want to understand and have an impact. We don’t want to live a life of just ‘going from therapy to therapy’ or education—YES, these are very important—but there is life beyond them—and we are left with less and less time for this life. We masquerade in these therapies and at school sometimes so much that we no longer have the strength for an ordinary life. For passions, for free time in our own way. Passion is our great strength and gives us the will to act”.

#### 4. Discussion

Analysis of the research material allowed us to fulfil the objectives of the research and to reconstruct the educational experiences of adolescents with ASD and the ways in which they understand their own education. It also made it possible to identify the most important barriers to equal access to education and inclusion in the school environment, according to the respondents, and to indicate their needs and hoped-for changes in the education system in Poland.

The most important barriers identified by the self-advocates include peer violence and sometimes verbal violence by teachers. Situations in which a person on the autistic spectrum experiences violence, is bullied or excluded, or treated in what they perceive to be an unfair manner and without understanding of their needs not only threaten their emotional well-being, but also negatively affect the educational process [39]. Thus, both the prevention of peer violence and the development of strategies to promote mutual understanding should be key concerns for teachers.

Another barrier identified by the young self-advocates is that their sensory needs are ignored and not met. In the school environment, there is a wide variety of sensory stimuli, and persons on the autistic spectrum present a diverse repertoire of responses to sensory stimuli. Failure to address specific sensory functioning can significantly negatively impact the functioning and learning of students on the autistic spectrum [40]. Self-advocates are pushing hard for a “sensory-friendly school”, where awareness of their specific sensory needs is built and action is taken to address them.

It can also be inferred from the statements of the young activists that the school did not create the right educational conditions for them, considering their interests and passions, as well as their diverse educational needs and abilities, which, in effect, hindered their educational success [39]. The self-advocates emphasized how important an educational tool their interests, talents and passions are. Winter-Messier notes that, “To know a child or youth with AS is to know his or her special interest area” [41]. Incorporating passions into the teaching and learning process builds positive peer relationships, and motivates and empowers them to explore, learn and discover the world in accordance with students’ needs and resources. As Speck notes, “It is not the child that should adapt to the school, but the school to the child” [42]. Responding to the diverse learning needs of students

requires a more flexible approach to the curriculum and consideration of the tenets of inclusive education, not only in terms of school policy and culture, but also in terms of the educational practices and teaching strategies used [15]. This, in turn, requires a universal design of educational processes [43] while considering students' diverse interests, forms of activity, expression and engagement [41,42].

## 5. Conclusions

The key recommendations emerging from the analysis of the educational experiences of young activists on the autistic spectrum include:

- Incorporating sound, unadulterated knowledge about the autistic spectrum and about the abilities, needs and rights of students with autism into educational and parenting programs.
- Creating functional, interesting and safe school spaces that resonate with the needs of people with autism [44], including the removal of sensory barriers in schools.
- Schools taking measures aimed at the prevention of peer violence, which should involve all actors in school life, i.e., pupils, teachers, all other school staff and the parents and carers of pupils.
- Responding to diverse learning needs by considering students' interests, forms of activity, expression and engagement in the educational process.
- Strengthening the right of every young person, including students on the autistic spectrum, to be involved in the life of the school and the community. The school should teach social participation and democracy and be co-managed by the students, which is related to the evolution of the school paradigm—from authoritarian to democratic [45].

Education organized according to the demands of the self-advocates would be the full implementation of the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [21], Article 24 of which mandates the right of persons with disabilities to education without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunities. The aim of inclusive education should be to develop in all students the competence to build a society in which all persons, regardless of differences in health, ability or background, are full members of the community and their diversity is seen as a valuable resource for social and civilized development [46]. However, this brings with it the need to change the entire educational system and every school, the design of which will not be possible without considering the voices and experiences of children and young people as full participants in society. This is brilliantly put by Davis and Watson [23] (p. 678) when they write that “If real change is to occur disabled children and their allies must gain a share of the power in educational institutions”.

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