

**dr hab. Marzenna Zaorska prof. UWM**

**University of Warmia and Mazury  
Olsztyn**

**Education of the Deafblind – Reality of Educational Practice  
(critical reflections)**

***1. Introduction***

Deafblindness is considered to be the one of the most serious human disabilities. Fortunately, people suffering from severe hearing impairment combined with visual impairment form in Poland, as well as in many other countries of the world, are a relatively small group both with respect to the general population and the population of disabled people. These estimations have remained unchanged for at least some decades now, which should, of course, be perceived in a positive light, though we would prefer to see them drop. Considering the medical criterion, i.e. the severity of hearing and visual impairment, it is estimated that there are two deafblind persons per 10 thousand citizens. This statistical evaluation and the epidemiological tendency connected with it were presented in the speech of William Green, the President of the world organisation for the deafblind DBI (Deafblind International). The speech in question was an opening lecture of the 6th European Conference on deafblindness, which took place in the period of 2-7 August 2005 in the town of Prešov, Slovakia, the motto of which was: "Making the invisible visible". During plenary sessions and thematic sections representatives of various social and community groups from almost all the countries of the globe and all continents who encounter deafblindness (representatives of the authorities, decision-makers in the field of education, non-government organisations' activists, researchers, teachers and therapists, social welfare workers, parents of deafblind children, non-disabled siblings of the deafblind and, naturally, deafblind adults themselves – assisted by their guides-interpreters) discussed various problematic issues concerning deafblind people's education, assistance in their personal development and then their adult life. The achievements of particular countries as well as international and local organisations which are actively involved in supporting the deafblind were underlined. The emphasis was put on innovative organizational and structural solutions with regard to medical, technological, psychopedagogical and social assistance provided for the population of deafblind people and social groups which have contact with the deafblind on a daily basis. Such an attitude to the discussed issue needs to be seen as encouraging, pointing to a positive direction with

reference to the future of the deafblind in the world and in particular countries. Critical assessments, however, were not absent. These were the opinions which not only articulated praises of what had been already done but additionally realistically pointed out shortcomings or these spheres in which progress was missing or was slow and highly unsatisfactory. As it turns out, one such sphere in many countries (in Africa, North America, Asia, and East Europe) is that of education and care provided for deafblind people at various stages of their lives, beginning with childhood, through adolescence and ending in adulthood. Thus, the following presentation of the issue of deafblind people's education in contemporary reality will not be a song of glory for what has been achieved but, on the contrary, it will indicate certain drastic shortcomings and deficiencies as well as absurdities connected with education and assistance provided for deafblind people in Poland.

It is not an open secret but a real fact that regardless of social openness towards them and some interest in their problems, clearly noticeable recently, the disabled community still fights with the stereotypical markedness of their abilities and possibilities of achieving success in personal life and education. It struggles against marginalisation and "lumping them together" as far as social welfare is concerned. It should not be surprising, then, that disabled people still do not feel rightful and worthy members of the society, that they often exhibit social passivity and isolate themselves from the problems of the general population. If this may be the case of people with a single disability, what can be said about these who suffer from a multiple disability, such as deafblind people.

## *2. Deafblind children and teenagers*

An objective examination of the sphere of supporting the development and education of deafblind children and teenagers as well as of providing assistance to the family in which there is a child with a severe combination of visual and hearing impairments may lead, unfortunately, to very sad conclusions. It would suffice to scrutinise several issues, such as: medical, psychological, pedagogical or speech diagnosis of a deafblind child's developmental needs; proper – adjusted to each individual case – medical or psychopedagogical therapy; educational and financial assistance offered to a family with a deafblind child; support provided by a local community; or, finally, current solutions concerning designating the best form of education for particular children. An additional problem is the lack of commonly accepted methodology of working with such a child and methods of communication used; whereas it seems that communication is the biggest predicament of this category of disabled

people. In a nutshell, it all refers to the problem of early diagnosis and early support of the development and further educational career of deafblind children and teenagers.

In July 2006 I was in charge of a two-week rehabilitation holiday for blind and visually impaired children and teenagers organised by Polski Związek Niewidomych (Polish Association for the Blind), the Warmia and Mazury Branch in Olsztyn. Parents also participated in the holiday. Amongst children under my care was a 7-year-old girl with a genetically conditioned visual-and-hearing Gorlin-Cohen Syndrome. Thanks to her mother, I **got to know the** history of the girl's life. She is the third and youngest child in the family. Upon her birth doctors noticed changes of genetic nature which they confirmed on the basis of a detailed diagnostic examination. Parents, immediately after the girl was born, were presented with the information that till the end of her life "she'll be a plant" (exact quotation of the doctors' words), so the most reasonable solution would be putting the child in a nursing facility for permanent stay. The girl was to be an immobile and mute child, additionally severely disabled intellectually. Thanks to the determination of her parents, but also of "those who understand the problem", as the mother described them, that is doctors (different from those who communicated the diagnosis), rehabilitants, speech therapists and teachers it was possible to achieve a satisfactory level of her development which she can now demonstrate. The girl can walk, run, jump and dance. She loves getting to know people and nature, she listens to music, watches TV and is interested in computers. Moreover, she undertakes relatively comprehensible attempts of verbal communication, amongst others due to a colchea implant. She seems to be a happy child enjoying her life. This particular girl owns her success to her family and "kindred spirits" she met on her way through life. But how many other deafblind children are not so lucky? This is, obviously, a rhetorical question. It is not rhetoric, however, to claim that each such child should have the right to an early, interdisciplinary and ethically unquestionable diagnosis, understood broadly as multidimensional, interdisciplinary support, expert rehabilitation and education adjusted to age and individual abilities. A family situation of such a child should be treated along similar lines, that is it would be worthwhile to create a network of institutions which offer professional rehabilitation, kindness and understanding of the problems involved, if only to spare parents the fight for the child through the thick jungle of obstacles and lack of understanding, or perhaps it would be more correct to say – through human light-heartedness.

When it comes to the issue of the education of deafblind children and teenagers, I would like to devote a few sentences to the system of education and the quality of educational activities. In Poland, special groups for deafblind children are created only in the Centre for

Blind and Visually Impaired Children in Bydgoszcz. As a digression I will add that recently an early intervention centre has been opened in this facility. Approximately 20 children attend classes for the deafblind annually. This tendency has been stable for several years now. On the basis of hypothetically assumed statistical data, the number of children and teenagers up to the age of 18 with a combination of visual and hearing impairments should be estimated in Poland at the level of 600 to 800. The conclusion is that all other deafblind children and teenagers are educated in other special education institutions, for instance schools for the blind or visually impaired, schools for the deaf or with hearing impairment, schools for children with learning difficulties (intellectually disabled), integrated schools or within the scheme of individual schooling. Irrespective of the type of school in which deafblind pupils are educated, that is regardless of the systemic solutions concerning the education of deafblind children and teenagers, I would like to underscore that on the whole while teaching such pupils specialist methods of work are used which are generally devised for and implemented when working with people with a single disability, for instance with hearing impairment only or with visual impairment only. Sometimes these methods are intuitively adapted to the needs of a child with combined visual and hearing difficulties. Such a solution, despite showing good will and being a genuine attempt to help on the part of the teacher, does not guarantee the correctness of the undertaken adaptation. Of course, articulating the above does not mean that I mind activities of intuitive nature in the work of the special education teacher. On the contrary, I believe that intuition plays a very important role in it. Rather, I summarise the shortcomings in the discussed sphere of educational activities with respect to the deafblind pupil in Polish schools. Unfortunately methodological solutions effected in educating children and teenagers with combined partial visual and hearing impairment are identical to the described above. It actually happens in some institutions that educational activities directed at particular pupils are equalled with providing care and simulating educational activities, which can be summed up as follows: "they will do something, mould something, do some exercises, and all will be fine". It is an unacceptable way of perceiving the nature of educational work with respect to deafblind children and teenagers. Sometimes it is convenient, yet still inadmissible.

As I have already mentioned, one of the most important issues in the process of the deafblind person's development is that of communication. It seems ideal to direct the therapeutic effort towards the development of verbal communication. However, not all deafblind children are able to master a particular way of communicating with the surrounding environment. Many of them need special, non-verbal methods, or even such non-verbal

methods which are devised especially with the view of the needs of a particular child. This is to be understood as using such methods as an object schedule system (calendar box) or unambiguous three- or two-dimensional symbols. Analysing practical activities in the sphere in question, it is worthwhile to add that as far as choosing a communication method for a deafblind child, there has appeared for some time now a highly alarming tendency to point out methods which are popular on the educational market, are new and have been just adopted in Poland or are simply fashionable in the world. Such an attitude may cause justified objections of ethical and moral nature but the excuse for it may be the fact that each of us more or less consciously is influenced by current fashion in various spheres of life.

And now I shall discuss the issue of specialist staff who teach deafblind children and teenagers. There is but one conclusion – the situation is not good. Generally teachers, class tutors, assistant staff members do not possess specialist vocational preparation. This is not caused by the lack of offers on the part of higher education institutions which want to undertake the effort to prepare specialist in this field, but the lack of interest on the part of specialists who already hold qualifications in other aspects of special pedagogy. Consequently, it is relatively difficult to assemble an adequate number of those who are willing to enhance their knowledge so that financial calculations might allow to implement a particular form of in-service training courses designed for teachers. It is true that a few people from our country had a possibility to specialise in the field of deafblindness in the United States, in the Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired Children in Watertown (the so called Perkins Institute); however, not all the investments seem to have been well thought of. If a one-year-long training is offered to a person who works in the health care and who has no contact whatsoever with deafblind children (unless occasionally) only because there was a case of deafblindness in the family, and now once in a while – in return, as a peculiar way of debt-paying – the person organizes a meeting for deafblind adults, it is not a profitable investment. The situation when the mentioned opportunity is offered to non-government organizations' activists who fulfil solely administrative functions may be considered likewise.

Assistant staff, in turn, that is caretakers employed in special education centres, are very often not prepared to work with disabled children, not to mention deafblind children in particular. Frequently, these workers do not even have a general pedagogical background. Good heartedness towards disabled children, which undoubtedly they exhibit, may not be sufficient. A similar situation concerns service staff – cleaners, cooks, doorkeepers, etc. All of these factors impact on the quality of education and up bringing activities directed to a particular category of children and teenagers. There is also no justification for employing

doorkeepers with no pedagogical background as carers/ tutors during holidays organised for children and teenagers, only because they work in an educational institution.

The issues analysed above create a situation where a family in which there is a deafblind child is lost in the maze of difficulties. The child herself/ himself is no less lost in this labyrinth and additionally carries the burden of the combined disability and its multidimensional consequences. This child would not have to, and actually should not, experience the difficulties stemming from the limitations caused by combined dysfunctions, provided there existed sensible systemic solutions and on condition that the surrounding environment exhibited an understanding attitude.

The foregoing analysis of educational dilemmas concerns deafblind children and teenagers who live in the so-called normal families in which the child gets as much attention as possible, in families that do care about the child's development. There are also families, fortunately their number is relatively small (fortunately for the families themselves, the deafblind child and the society) in which the child's disability is taken advantage of, or even enforced, in order to get additional privileges, funds, and financial means to provide for other members of the family. In such a family, that is a family which creates, enhances, and reinforces the child's disability, the child cannot expect a positive attitude towards any activities which might stimulate their development. Neither can they hope for the therapeutic help and educational support. The child can expect, however, other members of the family trying hard to prolong the condition of their sensory deprivation as it is most convenient for the relatives. It also happens occasionally that under the influence of the family and its behaviour towards relevant persons or institutions, the child is qualified as deafblind although they fulfil only borderline medical criteria of deafblindness. In other words, there is a certain group of deafblind, or perhaps it would be more proper to say a group of pseudodeafblind children, which is actually produced partly fictitiously. It is a kind of behaviour on the part of people who should care about the child most of all for which there is no excuse and no humanistic justification.

### ***3. Deafblind adults***

Activities focused on deafblind adults in most countries are conducted by social welfare and non-government organizations operating quite actively. In Poland such an organisation is Towarzystwo Pomocy Głuchoniewidomym (TPG) [Deafblind Support Society]. When analysing the question of special support for deafblind adults, the lack of regular psychopedagogic support for this category of disabled people needs to be pointed out.

However, the Society mentioned above has organized Deafblind Clubs in some bigger cities of our country, for instance in Warsaw, Lublin or Wrocław. Apart from that deafblind adults participate in Occupational Therapy Workshops for people with other types of disabilities, attend Social Welfare Daily Nursing Facilities, etc. They also have an opportunity to participate in rehabilitation holiday sessions, computer skills trainings, or open-air sculpture workshops. Unfortunately there exists no social welfare institution intended solely for the deafblind, although Deafblind Support Society has been involved for some years in trying to establish such an institution. Additionally TPG undertakes activities focused on providing information, such as publishing a quarterly “Dłonie i Słowo” (“Hands and the Word”), publishing a bulletin of the Deafblind Children’ Parents and Caretakers Section “Usłyszmy i Zobaczymy” (“Let’s Hear and See”), translating publications on deafblindness published in other countries. It also represents the interests of Polish deafblind people in European and world forums.

And at this point I would like to make a personal comment on the activity of such forums, which stems from my participation in the European DbI Conference last year in Peršov. I came to a puzzling conclusion that not only in Poland but also in other countries with exception of Scandinavia and Switzerland (thus it seems a worldwide tendency), activists who are involved in the work of non-government organizations for the deafblind are usually people who lost full sensory functions of vision and hearing as adults. I am actually surprised by the reasons why these people who function splendidly suddenly identify themselves with deafblind people. These are who turn themselves into the deafblind rather than being deafblind in reality. Perhaps such behaviour is attributable to individual personal traits of particular individuals. With reference to the above, there arises the question: where are all these deafblind adults whose disability is congenital or happened in childhood? And a hypothetical answer to this question might be that they are probably hidden in social welfare institutions or locked within the four walls of their elderly parents’ flats or some such places. Conclusion: in public these who are “strong” need to be shown, rather than the “weak” ones who may cause embarrassment or negatively testify to their country’s systemic, organizational or methodological solutions in the sphere of education and support provided for the development of a particular category of the disabled.

And finally, one more reflection. This paper has no concluding section as there are no adequate words to make such a conclusion in a proper, objective and honest way.

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**Edukacja osób głuchoniewidomych — rzeczywistości praktyki pedagogicznej  
(refleksje krytyczne)**

Streszczenie

Problem kompetentnego, profesjonalnego, dostosowanego do potrzeb i możliwości konkretnej osoby głuchoniewidomej wspomaganie rozwoju, rehabilitacji oraz edukacji w różnych okresach życia takiej osoby do dnia dzisiejszego stanowi problem otwarty, powszechnie dyskutowany w gremiach specjalistów na forach ogólnokrajowych i ogólnoświatowych. Treść artykułu zawiera wiele refleksji oraz zastanowień nad wskazanym wyżej zagadnieniem w odniesieniu do Polski. Analiza, o której mowa została oparta na dwóch grupach populacji głuchoniewidomych, tj. grupie dzieci i młodzieży oraz ludzi dorosłych. Artykuł nie włącza zakończenia, co stanowi swoisty protest jego autorki przeciwko nikłości działań na rzecz opieki i edukacji głuchoniewidomych podejmowanych w naszym kraju.

**Abstract**

The problem of competent, professional and suitable to the needs and capabilities of the individual deafblind person, the assistance with the development, rehabilitation and education in different periods of that persons life, is and open, is common discussed on nationwide and worldwide forums even at present times. The essence of the article contains many reflections and thoughts over this aspect in the present polish situation. The analisis of which I describe was caried out on two groups of deafblind people: the group of children and teenagers and the group of adults. The article does not conclude the ending which is a protest of it's author against the lack of actions in the sphere of special care and education of deafblind people in our country.