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On the Need and Opportunities for Creating a Positive Image of People with Disabilities

People with disabilities live all over the world. Their number is still growing due to the changes connected with the development of civilization, in particular the ones which have a negative influence on human health. It is assumed that people with disabilities constitute the largest minority in the world. In spite of the fact that we travelled the road from extermination to integration, the contemporary world is still not friendly for them. They have been pushed into the background of social life for ages, and are invariably considered an unappealing minority in comparison to the non-disabled majority. Taking into consideration the fact that more and more people are experiencing or will be experiencing disability, this phenomenon ceases to be an individual issue. The rise of social consciousness of disability is of primary importance among the key actions in the battle against discrimination of people with disabilities. Also, we have been trying to find ways to disseminate this information effectively among a wide range of audiences for years. Meeting the challenge of imparting this pedagogical culture and knowledge to the society is not an easy task. Even though social awareness of the need to create a positive picture of individuals with disability has undoubtedly risen, we are still looking for opportunities to present their image in an honest way. Understanding the needs and problems of people with disabilities, but also their functional abilities constitutes an essential precondition for meeting them, since the uniqueness of human relationships is based on the lack of indifference of man to others and on his/her responsibility for others¹, i.e. the situation where individuals need each other and are needed by each other².

¹ O. Speck, *Niepełnosprawni w społeczeństwie. Podstawy ortopedagogiki*, Gdańsk 2005, p. 192, 193
Original title: *System Heilpädagogik. Einökologisch reflexive Grundlegung*.

² E. Aronson, *Człowiek istota społeczna*, Warszawa 2000, p. 325. Original title: *The Social Animal*.

On the need to create a positive image of people with disabilities

In Poland, initiatives aiming at the perception of disabled people's needs have been taken for years. The lack of practical implications and a guarantee that these actions are carried out are usually their weakness. Sociological studies seem to confirm this fact. They show that "social attitudes towards disabled people are becoming more and more positive. However, these positive attitudes are more often declared at the level of beliefs than at the level of behaviors which are still full of rejection and discrimination."³ Disabled people are invariably attributed the following characteristics: "weak, fearful, nervous, lonely, withdrawing, lacking in self-confidence, unhappy with life, and poor."⁴ All this contributes to the fact that people with disabilities are still perceived as deserving compassion and needing help, and not as partners in various enterprises.

The author's own research entitled "Actions promoting integration of non-disabled and disabled people" (project no. BW 03/05-II carried out in the Academy of Special Education) attempts to look at the normalization of disabled people's life from the angle of media announcements which aimed at familiarizing the society with the subject of disability. In the academic year 2005-2006, 15 groups of 458 students from the Academy of Special Education in Warsaw studying education and special education were included in the research conducted with the use of a diagnostic survey. The groups were comprised of 138 full-time students and 320 external students. The full-time students attended a course called "Media in Education of People with Disabilities" or "Media in Special Education", and the external students attended a course called "Media in Education". Due to the nature of the paper, only the conclusions arising from the answers are outlined in the article.

People with intellectual disabilities are considered the most discriminated group by the respondents. At the same time, according to the students, this group is the most difficult to integrate. The grounds for these opinions include the following: "because people are afraid of them", "because they are different from us in their behavior", "because they diverge from social norms", "because people do not tolerate dissimilarity in these people's behavior", "people think they are fools", "people may think they are not normal", "because they live in a different world", "because people do not understand this disability", "because people do not

³ E. Zasepa, Cz, Czabała, M. Starzomska, Postawy wobec niepełnosprawności i osób niepełnosprawnych, Człowiek – Niepełnosprawność – Społeczeństwo, 2005, p. 28.

⁴ A. Ostrowska, Postawy społeczeństwa polskiego w stosunku do osób niepełnosprawnych. In: Gustavsson A., Zakrzewska-Manterys E. (ed.), Upośledzenie w społecznym zwierciadle, Warszawa, p. 88.

know how to treat people with mental disabilities”, “because people are afraid of interaction with such people”, “they are considered retarded”, “because it is more difficult to get to them”, “because they are often the least independent”, “they are not able to decide for themselves”, “it is difficult to communicate with them”, “because most often it is difficult to get along with them”, “because they always need other people’s help, which is troublesome”, “society thinks it is not possible to help them”. Other answers to the question about a discriminated community included respectively: people with physical disabilities, socially maladjusted individuals, people with hearing impairments, people with visual impairments.

A great majority of the students stated that they were in direct contact with a disabled person (they talked to him/her, they did a task together, they helped him/her to solve a problem). Most of the students mentioned the lack of knowledge on how to behave (so as not to hurt) as an obstacle to interactions with disabled people, and then: self-consciousness, barriers in communication, fear, concern, and embarrassment. Barely a dozen respondents think nothing can be an obstacle to interaction, and a few students cannot identify it.

According to the majority of the students taking part in the survey, media can become an ally in the integration of non-disabled and disabled people, and in consequence, they can also shape positive attitudes towards people with disabilities. Moreover, these students think that the ability of people with disabilities to make use of media influences the creation of their positive image in non-disabled people’s view, and the ability to use media increases the disabled individual’s appeal as a work or fun companion.

The majority of the respondents do not know any educational programs which introduce the world of people with disabilities. Remaining respondents claim that they know such programs, however, they are not able to name any specific titles. The majority of the students think that sensitization to disability issues should start as early as possible (e.g. in preschool).

On the opportunities to create a positive image of people with disabilities

The effectiveness of shaping positive attitudes towards people with disabilities depends on: creating an appropriate concept of a person with disability, reinforcing his/her image in an emotional positive way, making the value of the human being independent from his/her biological competence, broadening the knowledge of disabled people’s abilities and needs and ways to satisfy them as well as how to behave towards them, eliminating

unpleasant tensions, fears and concerns which arise due to the perception of body damage and anticipation of difficulties in interactions with people with disabilities, as well as shaping general positive prosocial attitudes, tolerance and acceptance of otherness⁵.

So how do we familiarize people with the subject of disability? Each message should reflect not only the author's views, but also the level of his/her knowledge on the issue of disability. They should present people with disabilities in a realistic way. Only expert and honest information is able to include cognitive, emotional and motivating spheres which influence attitude shaping. The subject of disability should be introduced in a systematic and repeatable way. In addition, the message's authenticity is increased when specific cases are shown⁶. "In general, the programs' effectiveness is greater if they convey a specific message to a specific audience, and they are not of general character, and if they rather focus on the desired behavior of the audience than on its attitudes towards disabled people in general."⁷

The messages which promote the accomplishment of this task can be divided into several types, including those which familiarize the audience with disability, and those which warn against risky behavior that may result in disability.

The Poland-wide educational program introduced by the Ministry of National Education and Sport and the Friends of Integration Association called "Are We Really That Different? Together in Our School"⁸ is an example of the first type. A special educational package called "Shallow Imagination Means Disability"⁹ is an example of the second type. A different, more detailed division can be made on the basis of materials designed with the intention of supporting pro-integration actions among younger students: programs which make students aware of the need to build mutually valuable human relationships ("Together in Our School", "Shallow Imagination"¹⁰), programs which sensitize students to the need to

⁵ H. Larkowa, Kształtowanie postaw wobec osób niepełnosprawnych przez środki masowego przekazu – psychologiczne uwarunkowania skuteczności. In: Hulek A. (ed.), Środki masowego przekazu a człowiek niepełnosprawny, Warszawa 1991, p. 67, 68.

⁶ H. Żuraw, Analiza publikacji prasowych poświęconych osobom niepełnosprawnym. In: Hulek A. (ed.), Środki masowego przekazu a człowiek niepełnosprawny, Warszawa 1991, p. 135-138.

⁷ F. Bernotowicz, Projektowanie mediów wizualnych w celu zmiany postaw wobec osób niepełnosprawnych. In: Hulek A. (ed.), Środki masowego przekazu a człowiek niepełnosprawny, Warszawa 1991, p. 36.

⁸ Poland-wide educational program for junior high students (2003), and high school and technical college students (2004) introduced by the Ministry of National Education and Sport and the Friends of Integration Association. Stowarzyszenie Przyjaciół Integracji, Warszawa – <http://www.niepelnosprawni.pl> (15.09.2007).

⁹ Płytki wyobraźnia to kalectwo – <http://www.plytkawyobraznia.pl> (20.09.2007).

¹⁰ ed. Stowarzyszenie Przyjaciół Integracji, Warszawa 2006.

respect disabled people's rights ("The ABC of Parking in a Disabled Parking Space", "Professionally Able"¹¹), and programs which warn against risky behaviors that may result in disability ("Shallow imagination"). The format of all the above mentioned programs provides children and teenagers with the opportunity to learn answers to questions about disability which are not always easy ones while doing simple tasks. These materials are free and available both in traditional and electronic form, which is their unquestionable merit.

Taking into consideration the fact that the ability to discern other people's needs and the ability to make an effort to meet them should be shaped in children starting as early as possible, the examples do not include social campaigns and programs addressed to an adult audience.

Conclusion

Creating conditions thanks to which people with disabilities will be able to participate fully in social life is a challenge and imperative of the present day. Having in mind Maria Grzegorzewska's words: "Beautiful words only bring harm if they are not backed up by action, even if it is only an attempt", it is worth to focus the actions disseminating the subject of disability on the following postulates: everyone should have knowledge of disability; it is possible to familiarize people of different age with the subject of disability using various methods; getting to know a person should be supported by heart and reason; people with disabilities should be understood and accepted; disability cannot be a reason for discrimination; efficient mechanisms of opportunity equalization should be created; disabled people's rights should be promoted and respected; disabled people's needs and rights should be construed naturally; it is necessary to create an environment which will be safe and comfortable for all its users; economic issues should not be considered more important than human rights; it is necessary to look for universal solutions which facilitate human life; it is necessary to break down the stereotypes concerning people with disabilities; it is necessary to respect disabled peoples' right to independence; it is necessary to support people with disabilities, and not to do everything for them; it is necessary to abandon talking about people in the context of their disability; it is necessary to pay attention to the language and style

¹¹ ed. Stowarzyszenie Przyjaciół Integracji, Warszawa 2007.

while talking about disability; it is necessary to treat other people in such a way that one would like to be treated himself/herself¹².

The present article does not attempt to exhaust the subject. It is only a comment in the discussion on the need to popularize the knowledge of needs and functional abilities of people with disabilities in the society.

¹² D. Gorajewska, Fakty i mity o osobach z niepełnosprawnością, Warszawa 2006, p. 107.

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