

LIFELONG LEARNING AS IMPERATIVE FOR NORMALISATION OF LIFE AND DIGNITY OF THE DISABLED

Educational literature devotes little space to problems related to education for adult disabled people, which belong to the field of *special andragogy*. Let us explain here that "*andragogy*" (from Greek: *anēr*; *andrós* 'man, human being' + *ágō* 'lead') in the most broad meaning – is defined as education of adults. It is one of the educational sciences concerned with the issues related to teaching, self-learning and education of working young people and adults (W.Okoń, 2001, p. 24). By analogy – *special andragogy* – is a branch of special education concerned with issues related to teaching, self-learning and education of teenagers and adults with a diagnosis of physical (also sensory) or intellectual disability. Special andragogy aims at preparing the best solutions concerning subjects for teaching and educating adults, methods and measures, organizational forms, using mass media, especially radio, TV or the Internet, as well as defining reasonable intervals between periods of more or less intensive teaching at profession training or in-service training courses for adult disabled persons. Before I proceed to the main part of my paper, I would like to draw readers' attention to other notions, important from the point of view of the problems discussed here, such as : "*disability*", "*lifelong learning*" sometimes called "*permanent education*" – defined from the point of view of contemporary imperative.

As far as introducing order to notions related to disability is concerned, it was The World Health Organization, which played the most important role; in 1980 it defined "*disability*" in this way "a disability (resulting from an impairment) is a restriction or lack of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being" (E.Wapiennik, R.Piotrowicz, 2002, p. 22). However, this definition proved to be not fully satisfactory, and intentionally taken up concept and correction works resulted in the year 2001 in the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health, abbreviated as ICF. The above-mentioned *ICF* classification was intended to change the social attitude towards a person suffering from the results of damages or body dysfunctions by adding to the already existing concept a medical and social model of disability. The notion of "*disability*" is used in this approach to define and underline the „multi-dimensional phenomenon resulting from mutual influence exerted between people and their physical and

social environment” (E.Wapiennik, R.Piotrowicz, 2002, p. 22). „*Disability*” is thus seen as universal human experience, which should be treated maybe not as much as a result of some impairment or dysfunction i.e. generally understood bad health, but rather as a result of barriers which are encountered or which can be encountered in the life environment of the disabled person (e.g. in the family), this is in the place where such person lives and normally functions.

Another notion I used intentionally was "*lifelong learning*" also called "*permanent education*", which allows to refer to a few aspects of education, as follows: 1) *basic education resulting from obligatory school* [in our case obligatory school means education in primary school and in secondary school]; 2) *post-secondary education* enabling the graduates of post-secondary schools to achieve appropriate education at a general and/or professional level and opening the possibility of further education at the university level; and 3) *permanent education* allowing continuous, more or less regular improvement of general and/or professional qualifications achieved earlier (W.Okoń, 2001, p. 196). Thus, it should be noticed that the modern educational system principle according to which the permanent education is defined as a process of continuous improvement of the qualifications acquired which lasts during the whole life, guarantees this right also to persons threatened with disability.

Permanent education including improvement and broadening of general and/or professional qualifications opens new perspectives of life and makes the life much richer for an adult person, no matter what his or her age and social status can be. The pace of life and rapid scientific and technological progress are today – as it is easy to notice – the factor which causes the education achieved at school totally insufficient – thus the need of its constant supplementation. The changes which take place as far as IT technology and technicization of social life are concerned force people, also disabled ones, to continue the education and improvement at a level adequate to their situation. Obviously, organizational forms and the dimension of such education must be suited to the needs and abilities of a particular person as well as to conditions in which the modified educational profiles and broadened general and/or professional qualifications will be rationally used in future.

By using the notion of „*imperative*”, (from Latin *imperativus* – which means as much as ‘commanding’), which I used in the title of this paper I mean "the necessity of drawing one's attention" to individual and social dimension of permanent education for the disabled, seen not only from the perspective of their condition and individual needs but also from the

perspective of the condition and development stage of Polish education, including special education.

Referring to the above, I have formulated a thesis that *lifelong learning* for the disabled can be considered as one of consequences of social integration and normalization of their difficult life. Thus, when the process of *social integration* of the disabled takes place in an improper way, probably also the *lifelong learning* process is not carried out in a rational way, and it does not result in awaited, fully satisfying effects (Cz.Kosakowski, 2003, Cz.Kosakowski, C.Rogowski, 2005, J.Zabłocki, 1992).

According to the definition of disability this unusual, multidimensional phenomenon can be related to the whole life span of a person: from one's birth to death (B.Harwas-Napierała, 2000, P.Socha, 2000). Hereunder I will apply the term "*life-span*" taken from developmental psychology to define the continuity of developmental changes of persons suffering from both physical and intellectual disability. This relates to persons who at each level of their life due to the condition of their health and individual, unique needs and limitations can have different expectations related to development of their personality, improving their skills and pace of acquiring new and reinforcing already mastered skills. Let us add that wide-scale research on the *life-span*, an important factor ordering needs and abilities of a human being was started by Charlotta Büchler in 1933 (W.Szewczuk, 1985, p. 37).

In this paper I would like to draw my readers' attention most of all to the social aspect of the "*lifelong learning*" of the disabled who are at so called post-educational age (i.e. over 25 years of age). The notion of "*lifelong learning*", or "*permanent education*" is a notion which on the one hand suggests the need of the present program of special education (*Latin: special educatio*) for the disabled, on the other, it seems to stress the meaning of the integration process consisting in inclusion of such people into problems of the closest local milieu (A.Firkowska-Mankiewicz, 2004). "*Inclusion*" assumes the creation of a strong feeling of community and solidarity between people in general, not depriving the disabled of their natural rights for development nor of the possibility of satisfying the need to build relations and maintaining social contacts (J.Hall, 1992, A.Firkowska-Mankiewicz, 2004).

According to European and world-wide standards contained in numerous internationally available documents concerning human rights, each human being, also a person suffering from disability, has the right to full participation in social life, in the life of his living and educational environment (e.g. family circle, peers, cultural milieu). The following documents appear to guarantee such rights: Universal Declaration of Human Rights

(1948), World Declaration "Education for All" (1990), Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (1994), The Salamanca Statement - The Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994), or The Madrid Statement (2002). It is worth mentioning here that in all the above-mentioned documents education plays the most important role as one of the most important, irrevocable human rights, independent from the race, gender, place of living, geographical coordinates, level of development or the type and degree of disability. "*Education for all* means education for everyone, especially for the weakest and those in greatest need" (F.Mayor 1994, za:A.Firkowska-Mankiewicz, 2004, p. 19).

Historically speaking, the first step on the way towards the realization of the need for the "*education for all*" was the idea of normalization which consisted in acknowledging the right of the disabled (especially those suffering from intellectual disability) to being treated by others with dignity and respect, equally with other members of the humanity.

The primary assumption behind this process is most of all creating strong emotional relations between the subjects (i.e. between the young people or adult disabled people with different needs and development opportunities and their parents, siblings, caretakers, teachers, physiotherapists or instructors), which could result in undertaking by them together educational tasks. "*Permanent education*" assumes the possibility of including the disabled into local educational institutions for general and professional education as well as other institutions of educational character equally with their fully able peers, however, taking into consideration individual, emotional and social factors as well as factors directly connected with the educational process as such (e.g. proper conditions in the place where education is carried out, availability of entrances, equipment in working stands, supporting rehabilitation equipment) (por. J.Hall, 1992). The idea of normalization, related to all people suffering from disability (e.g. young people or adults) opened the way for the notion of "integration", which certainly consolidated its proper meaning in activities aimed at their support, possibility of lifelong learning and multi-profile education. Nowadays there are more and more courses of different types and other forms of lifelong learning (e.g. via the media) offered to the disabled with individual, special needs resulting from difficulties they suffer from. According to my research, however, in the field of the lifelong learning for the disabled there is still a lot to be done. The results of survey acquired by interviewing disabled persons with the use of a questionnaire divided into a few sections, are a proof of this statement.

The research was conducted in a group of 125 persons aged 27 to 58, suffering from physical (also sensory) and intellectual disability. There were 86 (68.8%) women and 39

(31.2%) men subject to research; including: 45 (36%) persons with intellectual disability (of varying degree), 32 (25.6%) persons suffering from the dysfunction of the musculoskeletal system (cerebral palsy), 24 (19.4%) persons with hearing disorders, 17 (13.6%) blind and partially-sighted persons, 4 (3.2%) stammering persons, suffering from epilepsy, cleft palate and lip, and 3 (2.4%) persons suffering from schizophrenia. Among those under research - 52 (41.6%) persons were living in nursing homes, 48 (38.4%) were married (of which: 37 (43.02%) women and 11 (28.2%) men); 54 (43.2%) had primary education completed, 31 (24.8%) had secondary education completed, 29 (23.2%) persons finished vocational schools with different specializations, 11 (8.8%) finished special school for those with deeper intellectual disability. Supplementary education (different ranges and specializations of courses – ranging in duration from a few hours to a few months) at a different level of ontogenesis – was taken up by total number of 73 (58.4%) persons. The following courses were most popular among the persons under research: computer course – 43 (34.4%) persons, artistic and practical handwork – 28 (22.4%) persons and human resources management – 2 (1.6%) persons; 33 (26.4%) persons regularly used TV programmes and the Internet to develop their interests in nature, music, culture and literature.

The quality of social functioning of the disabled depends, on the one hand, on the subjective feelings of such persons and, on the other hand, conditions created for them allowing them to take an active part in the process of creating themselves as the subject of education. The results of individual rehabilitation, also the social one, are dependant on the degree of engagement (participation) of the individual person in social life, especially in the life of the closest family as a social group, or a group of peers, and further – participation in culture, art, sport, social life in the local milieu, etc, something each human being has a right to. Thus, maybe it is worthwhile to consider two types of conditions, essential for holistically understood process of *lifelong learning* of the disabled (independent from the ontogenesis stage), which are: on the one hand – internal conditions; and 2) on the other – external conditions.

Distinguishing internal conditions of *permanent education* I have in mind the intricate process of personal, also noetical (i.e. spiritual) development of a human being, defined from the point of view of its level of development, predispositions and abilities possessed, motivations, maintained and already acquired skills, habits, needs one feels and the strive for their fulfilment as well as the opportunities for shaping a positive image of the world and oneself as an important element and a subject acting in this world (K.J.Zabłocki, 1992, Cz.Kosakowski, 2003).

Defining the external conditions favourable for *permanent education* we can notice that they are related mostly to the educating environment (e.g. family, group of peers, institution enabling to undertake various forms of supplementary education or to improve numerous functions). I have noticed that this very life environment seems to decide about the degree of interest and the attempts to use the achievements of science and technology for the needs of the disabled people under my research (independently of age of life, degree of limitations and barriers resulting from the dimension and degree of impairments or dysfunctions of organs and tissues). It was this environment which enabled the disabled to gather necessary experience, to achieve, just like the others, knowledge and necessary in life skills which could let them live a better, fully satisfying life and acquire a better social status in future.

Observing the present activities related with lifelong learning, which are carried out in numerous ways, I can draw a conclusion that the undertaken forms of educating or improving a given person's skills were dependent on the type and the degree of disability, age of life, the person's openness and readiness. The evaluation of the effectiveness of the preferred form of education must be – as it turns out – be carried out individually in a fully aware and intentional way.

To sum it up – I would like to underline it once again that “*disability*” is a multidimensional and universal phenomenon, concerning different spheres of human life. It afflicts people during their whole life-span; from conception to death. It belongs to the scope of human existence. It would be hard to hide from the world if, according to the National Census carried out in 2002 in Poland there were 5 million 456 thousand disabled persons, which constitutes 14.3% of the whole Polish society (A.Żyta, 2007, p. 11). The fact that there are numerous problems connected with the need of educating the disabled inspired me to take the challenge and to speak about the matter in question. I believe that the “*lifelong learning*” I consider deeply to be important, is a reasonable basis for the normalization of life of millions of people suffering from physical or intellectual disability, such normalization can give them a feeling of safety, usefulness, being the creative force and the feeling of dignity.

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