

The Quality of Life of Disabled Students

The problem of life's quality is ambiguous and multidimensional because it refers to the entirety of human's life, which is: to sense human's self-awareness in its every sphere of personality, i.e. physical, intellectual, social and spiritual, to formulate in group and individual dimension, in objective and subjective categories, and also in context of diverse and specific conditioning of existence. Z. Palak (2006, p.9) considers that sense of quality of life from subjective point of view is "the most significant in the whole regulatory-incentive system of an individual". Peculiar comprehension of the meaning of quality of life in the subjective sphere, compared with sense of happiness and satisfaction from life is particularly important in context of disabled persons. E. Augustyniak-Nawrot (2001, p. 18) considers that the quality of life in case of disabled persons means, the same as in the case of non-disabled persons, the sense of pleasure, satisfaction from one's own existence, which gives aim and meaning of life, in context of one's own needs and abilities.

J. Kirenko (2006) enumerates the measures of life's quality in the subjective spheres. These measures describes feelings, expressed by disabled people, about the past (perception and estimation of the things that were in past), the present and the future (expectations, perspectives, aspirations). We perceive our quality of life as the resultant of model – ideal sense of satisfaction and current realities.

The sense of quality of life refers to various spheres of human's existence, including the perception of educational successes. Education of disabled persons still arouses a lot of controversy, both: among experts and persons concerned. In accordance with UN Convention for Disabled Persons we recognize the equality of rights among disabled persons, their right for social integration and recognition of fully autonomy of choice. The choice of educational system, its profile and direction is a crucial decision for every human which has an influence on educational, professional career and life's chances. Contemporary outlook on full rights of disabled persons is unquestionable, however obstacles in its practical realization occurs. Disabled persons has lower level of education (at its every level), the rate of persons which hold an university education is 2.5 to 3 times lower than among non-disabled persons. The small number of disabled students result from number of obstacles, which they face in the early period of rehabilitation and education. D. Gorajewska (2006) classify, as a belonging to a category of these obstacles the following ones: small group of students educated in universal secondary schools and low percentage of persons commencing to matura examination, architectural, financial barriers and barriers in the access toward information, the lack of acceptance in the group of peers and teachers (including university teachers and compensational attitude, that is: expectation of privileges and relief).

Overcoming these above mentioned difficulties needs, not only systematical, unified legislative arrangements, but also fully commitment of society of disabled and non-disabled persons in discovering life's resources, not – a consequences of disability, despite of its sort, level and source. Disabled person is an addressee, not only of rights, but also of obligations. It demands complex therapeutically – rehabilitation and educational solutions consistent with contemporary theoretical thesis and legislative arrangements. In reference to disabled persons, their activity in life of particular society is expected. De Clerk, Goedele A. M. (2007) describes this process, as a process of awaking from the passive existence and stagnation, from the world of dreams about ideal conditions for disabled.

In Poland there is no unified standards in sphere of supporting students with disability, and the best organized supporting system is – according to G. Dryżałowska, H. Żuraw (2006) – at Podlaska Academy in Siedlce and at Warsaw University. At these universities studies about 500 students with various sorts of disability, for whose social assistance, life and rehabilitation consultancy is organized. To carry out these actions, the plenipotentiaries for disabled persons were called into being.

Kraków – city of universities – cannot be praised for significant number of disabled students, they constitute only 14% (70 students) of a number of students attending at early mentioned universities. Similarly, as at other universities in Poland, also in Kraków the post of disabled persons plenipotentiary was called into being. It's mission is to help and support students with disability in a process of education and preparation to commence job on an open market. Universities has various organization of the post of disabled persons' plenipotentiary. UJ and AGH has an Office for Disabled Persons which employs manager and cooperating consultants (UJ) or lecturer (AGH). AP has a Plenipotentiary of Rector for Disabled Persons, whose function is held by academic teacher. The offer of aid depends on student's needs and changing legislative arrangements. The most visible changes in offer are noticed on an example of comparison of changes at S. Staszic University of Science (AGH) in sphere of deaf student's support.

- Year 2001 – AGH joined “Program of Universities Friendly to Disabled Persons” and as a first in Malopolski Region made use of “Pitagoras” program sponsored by PFRON (The State Fund of Rehabilitation of the Disabled);

- Year 2003 – Calling into being the Office for Disabled Persons;

Year 2006 – employing sign language interpreters, whose task is to help employers and students to communicate each other during classes and exams, in accordance with the regulations there is possibility of usage of help of sign language interpreter;

Year 2006/7 – creation of service (aid) for deaf students while placing main library at their disposal, as well as enabling students to use from devices which support hearing;

Creation of website for deaf students and sign language interpreters, as well as creation of Association of Disabled Persons AGH;

Organisation, in cooperation with The Polish Association of Deaf in Kraków organises courses of sigh language for students and employees of AGH, integration camps, workshops – which acquaint students with the essence of deaf problem and alienation;

In the light of the aforementioned consideration there must be question posed: how disabled persons evaluate their quality of life in sphere of education at the university level? Is an improvement of quality of disabled students' life possible?

Student with disability of vision as an addressee of rights and obligations in light of own researches

The aim of research was to establish the opinion of visually challenged students about functioning of the plenipotentiary for disabled persons at three universities in Kraków, as well as to identify the shape of mutual cooperation in opinion of researched persons. The main and detailed scientific issues were formulated in following questions:

1. How students with vision disability perceive their studies in sphere of support on the part of university society?
2. Does students with vision disability, and in what degree, make use of support offered to them by plenipotentiary for disabled students?
3. How researched persons evaluate their cooperation with plenipotentiary?
4. What are the expectations toward plenipotentiary?

In diagnosis of subjective sense of life's quality and vision-disabled students' problems perception, the method of individual cases was used. Interview questionnaire was used as a scientific tool. Researches were conducted by student of Pedagogical University of Cracow – K. Tutaj - under the direction of the author of this analysis in May 2007. Voice recorder, with the consent of researchee, was used to record comments. In research five students took part – age 21 to 25, who represented different universities and fields of studies.

Kasia – 5th year of special pedagogy, AP. The choice of her field of study resulted from her personal interests and will to help others. When she was in secondary school she was put forward to the contest for volunteers “Ośmiu Wspaniałych” – “Magnificent 8”, nowadays she is volunteer in special school, she cooperates with A. Dymna's Foundation – “Mimo wszystko” – “Against the Odds”. She sings with music group. She derives a lot of satisfaction from her studies, she estimates well her contact with peers. She uses black-print writing, she takes notes at classes by her self, she uses magnifying glass and always has possibility to pass her exams in alternative way, e.g. orally or with increased forms. She make's her living thanks to various scholarships, nursing benefit - because of moderate degree of vision disability: “the situation of disabled student seems to be very profitable, there's nothing better than studying” (quotation). She occasionally use from support of plenipotentiary, e.g. signature on the form concerning the shift of term of maintenance grant application.

Ola – 4th year of political science, AP. She has chosen political science, not history – which is her passion – because she interests most with modern history. She doesn't considers herself as a disabled person, despite she's under the specialist physician because of cataract and nystagmus. She uses magnifying glass and takes black-print writing notes. She makes her living with maintenance grant, special and scientific scholarships. She doesn't receive nursing benefit, as well as not using support of plenipotentiary.

Magda – 1st year of supplementary studies – Russian studies, UJ. She has a MA degree in Ukrainian philology, she is interested in knowledge about both: Slav countries and culture. She is going to start studies at the department of sculpture at Academy of Fine Arts (ASP), but she doesn't know how she will handle painting and drawing lessons – maybe in individual course? She is a blind person from since she was born, because of retinopathy of prematurity. She uses Braille alphabet, she was making notes with plate and chisel, currently she uses Braille machine or computer with software for blind persons (JAWS) more often, she records classes by voice recorder, she scans books and plays them in digital form – by listening, in extraordinary cases she asks her friends for help. She makes her living by maintenance grant, special and scientific scholarship. She doesn't contact or cooperate with plenipotentiary, because she didn't received support “immediately”, while she was trying to get a possibility to live in university's dormitory.

Ania – 3rd year of Slav philology, UJ. She comes from Sofia – Bulgaria, she is in Kraków as a Erasmus/Socrates Program student. In secondary school she met Polish girl who taught her polish Braille alphabet, then she wanted to master Polish language, literature and culture. She contacted with Jagiellonian University's plenipotentiary by e-mail and was provided with support while her stay in Poland. She uses area-orientation service, book-scanning service and English language course. She gets materials from classes in digital form or printed in Braille. She makes her living by program scholarship and special grant – as a person with serious level of premature vision disability, genetically contingent.

Karolina – 2nd year of sociology, AGH. She is a blind person, because of glaucoma, she has sense of light and perceive some colours. She wanted to study philosophy at Jagiellonian University, but she wasn't provided with a room in dormitory, that's why she has chosen sociology at AGH. She uses Braille alphabet for taking notes, as well as notebook with JAWS software or voice recorder. Only once lecturer didn't agree for voice recording (“she was prejudiced against it because of her recorded lecture and for fun placed on Internet” – quotation). She arranges exams individually. She uses typhlo-information studio at AGH, where she is able to print text in Braille alphabet. Upon mutual agreement between AGH and UJ she attends English language classes, where she gets Braille prints. She receives scientific scholarship, special grant and additional financing from EQUAL program (for area-orientation classes).

Combining gathered data about forms of plenipotentiaries' for disabled persons support, it was found that students most often use educational service in form of classes materials reproduction, use of necessary devices in library, area orientation classes and

foreign language classes in small, three-person groups (UJ and AGH students use this form of support permanently). Four from five students used information about existing possibilities of financial support or available training. Plenipotentiary cannot directly offer financial and social support, but is able to give an opinion on application-request for subsidising from university's funds (AP) or help to grant dormitory (AGH). Researchees didn't use from consultancy in process of choice of field of studies, as well as psychological support, specialists employed in medical centre for students.

Generalising the results: four from five students estimates positively the general range of plenipotentiary's support, whereas plenipotentiary's personality in direct interpersonal relations was estimated badly by two persons. Most of researchees' expectations is pointed at the office of plenipotentiary, not at particular person who hold that office. Greater availability and individual approach toward student was demanded, as well as more area-orientation classes and in sphere of rights and obligations of disabled student. On the other hand: plenipotentiaries demanded greater self-reliance of students and understanding the essence of fulfilling student's obligations in accordance with principle: "disabled student doesn't vary from other students in sphere of rights and obligations, only the realisation of it can assume alternative forms, that takes into account the specific character of disability" (quotation).

Conclusion

The needs and expectations of disabled students about an offer of equalizing chances in a process of education, which is one of disabled persons plenipotentiary's tasks, are a natural factor which decides, whether mutual cooperation will be started or not. Whereas the quality of this cooperation depends on mutual relations, which should be based on readiness and openness of both parties toward face to face encounters. Presentation of individual silhouettes of students with disabled vision is a proof for overcoming of barriers and myths which concerns their abilities and limitations. The fact of university level education is an evidence of their creativity, which improves their life's quality.

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