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## **The Educational Biography of an Adult Blind person. Ups and Downs – Events That Warm Or Cool Educational Aspirations (a Research Report)**

My research within the scope of my PhD dissertation: “Education and Overcoming the Life Crisis in a Blind Person’s Experience” aimed at presenting the importance of education (including adult education) in overcoming the life crisis such as the lost of sight. More and more of the disabled continues their post-secondary and higher education and each of them has specific and very individual needs, which ought to be well understood in order to contribute to better cooperation between the teachers and their disabled adult students. Quite recently, most of the disabled finished their education on the vocational school level as there was no possibility to continue their education. Therefore, a new category of “disabled adult students” has become a novelty to adult education specialists.

The main concept of my research is the concept of the trajectory of human fortune by G. Riemann and F. Schutze (1992). The term of trajectory is successfully used in the research of human lot, especially processes out of control, including suffering and pain as it is reflected in the lives of the disabled. The concept of trajectory of human fortune by G. Riemann and F. Schutze has been enriched with the typology of M. Malewski biography.

The aim of my research was to reconstruct the perception of education in life by a visually challenged person struggling the life crisis of the lost of sight.

I have used educational biography as a method of my research and extended individual interview as technique. “Biography” comes from Greek and means the description of life (*bios* – life + *grapho* – describe). This method is most commonly used in the adult education and the interest of biographical and narrative techniques among the researchers has led to the creation of the paradigm of biography in the adult education. It is highlighted, however, by a number of educators that the leading term within this issue is “educational biography”. The educators claim that although biography is reflected in various aspects of education they share the common view that education concerns the whole of human existence. To generalize the subject under analysis, it can be claimed that “educational biography” is a vision of one’s individual life in order to make it better and to live full life. This approach underlines the activity of human being and thus their subjectivity.

Extra materials necessary to analyse educational biography have been collected by means of biographical games by P. Demetrio (1999) such as “When Did You First... First Conscious Sensations and Experience”, “Important Characters”, “Educators. Our Masters”, “The Coincidence. When There Are No Apparent Changes” and a board game “The Goose”. The games have been adapted to the aim of my research and to the disability of the subject of research.

Biographical games help develop recalling skills and discover the essence of memory. They are also useful in practicing the abilities of telling about one’s life. The games are an invitation to penetrate oneself, to find an answer to a question who I am, what I have done and what others have done for me. Retelling one’s life has also got a therapeutic impact.

The choice of the subject of my research is the outcome of my perception of this person as someone unusual as well as his educational experience among other disabled persons I have met. The introduction of this person and his educational path is aimed to be a proposition how to deal with other disabled people who have seen a chance to overcome their life crisis and trajectory in education. The statistics reveal that the number of the disabled acquiring higher education is growing and therefore their biographies should be recognized and told.

### **The educational biography of the subject of research – education path stages**

The biography under research (Piotr aged 45) is not uniform and we can determine educational lines. These lines, according to E. Dubas (1993) reflect the complexity of learning for an adult. In Piotr's biography we can distinguish at least two lines:

1. "Disturbed" (discontinuous) line with stages of returning to education (secondary vocational school in Bydgoszcz), stages of educational silence (job employment in Olkusz), returns to educational projects (willingness to pass Matura final exams and to study),
2. "Renaissance" line embracing education in a number of activities – professional (courses and trainings improving his qualifications), sport, rehabilitation (new methods of rehabilitation – diving, horse riding, climbing), intellectual (pedagogic studies).

In Piotr's life there are a few stages of educational path: two primary schools, vocational school, two extramural secondary schools for adults, medical massage college and extramural pedagogic studies.

The slow process of losing sight has began at the threshold of Piotr's educational career. Struggling the situation of becoming a disabled and sand-blind and in consequence a blind person embraced the whole Piotr's education.

Piotr's educational path is diversified, has been in progress for almost forty years. Currently, Piotr is a turner, office clerk, specialist of medical massage and next year he is doing MA in pedagogy.

From the time perspective we can claim that he has been educationally successful thanks to:

5. intelligence
6. awareness and mature choices
7. ambition
8. self-motivation to study
9. proper balance between aspirations and results of studies (balance between success and defeat, warming and cooling of aspirations).

## Success and defeat. Warming and cooling of educational aspirations

There is an obvious connection between the level of aspirations and the acquired results in the process of education. The former determines the latter. Generally, the more successful you are the higher aspirations you have or you keep them on the same level. Successful learning shapes the level of aspirations corresponding with the real capacities of a student while defeat, especially repetitive defeat, determines the decrease of the level of aspirations or its high changeability.

However, continuous success can lead to strengthening the lower than optimal level of aspirations and in consequence waste one's possibilities of a progress. Therefore, it is necessary to experience defeat occasionally. Defeat can be a mobilizing force to a bigger effort in a further process of education. It does not lead, however, to discouragement as positive experiences dominate.

It seems that the best situation is when you are often successful but sometimes also defeated. Defeat tells you what your optimal level is. What is more, the undertaken activity is unsure of results. If your anxiety is tiny then it is positive in the education process as as such it does not corrupt your activities and does mobilize you to perform.

Taking into account the correlation between the aspiration level of an individual and their results in education process we can be more effective in educational interactions (Włodarski, Matczak, 1998). Hopper created two models of educational aspirations:

1. warming of the aspirations
2. cooling of the aspirations

The beginning of education path in life of an individual is warmed by the society so everyone has primary education and is able to write, read and count. Next level of education starts the process of cooling of the educational aspirations of the majority to discourage them from going over the vocational school. Consequently, the balance between the roles and jobs performed in a society.

The key to Piotr's educational success was the balance between success and defeat within different spheres of life. Owing to that he was better motivated to overcome the defeats. At the same time he could be happy with his successes which made him feel good at a few branches.

**Table 1. Successes. Events that warmed educational aspirations.** (This is a direct quotation of what Piotr recognizes as success or a warming event.

Education in Lodz	In Lodz the level of education was very poor. What I had learned in the first six years in a normal school was enough until the end of this special school in the eighth form. I was better than others
Travelling by train on my own	I used to go home from school by myself. That made me very happy. I felt adult and self-sufficient. For a boy whose family didn't travel at all that was a big thing.
Joining scouts (camps)	We used to go to scout camps. I joined scouts at that time. I liked being a scout very much. One-week camps at the lake that was really something. We sat in tents, no teachers, no preaching, the rain poured, the tent had to be put in a different place and dug out all around.

	<p>We carried water in thirty liters containers. I had never done it! (sounds delighted). I loved it so much that I wanted to do everything there (laughter). Everything could be done.</p> <p>One night it poured really hard and so the next day we had an inspection which decided that our camp was to be finished and we were supposed to go back to school. That were late 70ties and our state was terribly caring. So we went to the head of the school, we the scouts, and said that we wished to stay, that we liked it there and had no intention of going back to school. We had lake and forest there, we could play football and so on things like fresh air and sport. The head only said: "ok, but if something happens to you than you must go back immediately", I said then "We will be fine!" and we managed to convince him to let us stay there. He listened to us when we had strong arguments.</p> <p>We also went to the mountains and I liked it. We stayed in a hostel. First time in my life I saw a bunk bed. The two years I spent in Lodz were very good for me.</p>
School graduation in Lodz and dealing with different matters in a school office	I had to deal with all the documents on my own. To get papers from this school, from the previous one, that was a really big thing for me. I had to see to all the matters of my concern. If I had stayed in Torun I'd had become a true disaster! Now when I think about it I begin to understand my sister. That she's such a pain as our parents did everything for her. I had to cope with my problems on my own.
School in Bydgoszcz (profession training, sport achievements)	<p>One man trusted me and let me work on a milling machine. I wanted to prove that man, everyone in the school that although I was blind I could do any job. They let me work on a milling machine but that was risky.</p> <p>I did sport in Bydgoszcz as well. We started going to the swimming pool. On the first day the teacher put a 5 meter rope from one side across and we started swimming so he could see how good we were. We swam and swam and then he said who could swim in the whole of the swimming pool. I was given that privilege as well and next I had normal training sessions. We had to swim on time. Then I started to play football.</p>
Employment in Olkusz	When I went to a job interview to Olkusz, they showed me the huge hall with plenty of wire everywhere. I had no idea how I could work there between all that wire. How could I tell one from the other? How could I learn to recognize them? They laughed at me and said that all people working there were visually challenged and had no problem with the wire. I was so much impressed that I wanted very much to work there and learn all the new things.
Final exams in Wroclaw	When I passed the finals I felt so exhausted that I promised myself not to study anymore. But later I thought I felt so happy when I had passed that I should continue my education. I had nothing to lose.
Massage school in Cracow. Massage trainings	I studied very hard in Cracow but it was great fun. That is the job I want to do and that's why I go to different trainings and learn all the time.
Rehabilitation in Torun Duchas Foundation	I used to go to horse-riding, canoeing camps and climbing camps with Duchas Foundation. I believed I could learn everything and I was right. Once I even galloped.

	And one more amazing thing, I was learning to scuba dive! Do you know that none of the seeing people I know has done what I have done, and what about you?
Extra mural studies in Torun	I manage to pass exams. I'm able to deal with it. I'm about to defend my MA thesis. I'm going to continue my education as I plan to go to open lectures. I like to study.

**Table 2. Defeats. Events which cooled educational aspirations**

The level of education in Lodz	<p>I think I learned with retards there as they couldn't memorise simple definitions. Some of them were smart enough and enjoyed the lack of necessity to study.</p> <p>In Lodz the education was poor. It was only a kind of mortuary.</p> <p>I think the teachers were not trained to work with kids like us who had sight problems. They worked as if we could see. It should have been different... The methodology must be changed. For example, the geography teacher told us to find a place on a map. I remember I was furious as I couldn't read these names on the map even when I managed to find them.</p> <p>As I said, the teachers in schools for the blind were not prepared to their job.</p>
No sport at school in Lodz	Physical education – be careful so no one gets hurt, but I was very active. I was not happy with doing nothing in this class. We were not allowed to sledge as the authorities had forbidden it. It was stupid to tell a young boy or girl to stay indoors and do nothing.
The psychological consultation after school graduation in Lodz	We talked with a psychologist what we could do after school but in my opinion the psychologist was not very creative. I don't know why we were supposed to be passive (said with anger). One boy and one girl from my group were the only people in the school who chose secondary education. I don't know why the teachers believed we were able to manage only vocational schools. They should have been more supportive or encouraging. Everyone who wants to study should be able to do it. This psychological consultation made me choose a vocational school.
Problems with joining the school in Bydgoszcz	The chairman of the Polish Blind Association said that we was opening an extra mural secondary school for the blind. I went to see him to inform him that I wanted to join that school last year. I passed the exam but they answered I wouldn't be able to do that job. I wasn't interested in the job but I needed this qualification. I wanted to go to a secondary school to find something good for me. I only needed their diploma but they didn't want to help. Would they get me a job in the future? There was a guy in Bydgoszcz, Mr. R who got the money whether he had students or not. When he taught a group of students he was in a mess because of their behaviour And that was a problem so he tried to talk the first year students into giving up their education.
The school in Bydgoszcz – getting rid of the class	<p>A lot of people gave up after the first semester because of R's influence. There were 5 or 7 of us in the second year and R did his best to get rid of us no matter the exam results we had. And thus, there was no third semester.</p> <p>R was able do discourage anybody so what was the point? A group of people wanted to study but who cared when the head of the school was against us all. So I asked myself</p>

	what the hell was going on?
The talk with the teaching department at the Nicolas Copernicus University	I wanted to study at the university but I was told they were not prepared to have a student like me. They couldn't offer me anything. The best thing they could suggest was to go to Warsaw as something was supposed to be taking place there.
Lack of technical support to study at the Nicolas Copernicus University	The only thing I don't have at the university are the electronic manuals and materials. Sometimes I'm fed up with depending on the others and asking them for everything. The lecturers always tell me to write an essay. How am I supposed to write if I have nothing to read. I get the impression that I'm a burden and they want to get rid of me as soon as possible.

In this article I want to stress how important is the knowledge of young disabled people aspirations. Only with this knowledge rehabilitation or social specialists, schools and employers will know how to develop the activity, interests and motivation to work and socialize of the disabled. The sense of work, culture and satisfaction at work and society can help a young disabled individual find their own identity, sense and importance of life.

Piotr, thanks to studying, can recreate his own identity after the life crisis. Education in the whole of his life created the possibility to develop and come to terms with his life and with the world. His life has become better organized and more successful. In Piotr's case, education has changed his biography. His life crisis has been overcome as well as the negative disintegration.

A number of disabled people could have a different educational and professional experience if they had been given a chance to make progress and effort instead of claiming that "in a cripple's life there is no place for demands". There are gifted and ambitious disabled persons but their aspirations have been often "cooled" at the very beginning of their educational path.

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