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Social Reception of Chronically Hard of Hearing People – Intellectual Myths and Stereotypes

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Social reception of deaf people is a characteristic example of how intellectual disability stereotypes and myths arise around the unknown. Perception of the deaf in our society is really untrue. The creation of intellectual disability stereotypes and social myths is based on lack of knowledge and false opinions. A stereotype is popularly understood as "functioning in a person's mind a social image of reality related to things, persons, social groups, which is based on incomplete and false knowledge about the world, which is, however, reinforced by tradition and resistant to changing" (M. Szymczak (ed.) 1988, p.332), while a myth is defined as „false conviction, a theory accepted without a proof, also deceitful image of reality, simply fiction" (M. Ledzińska 1999, p.351).

According to W. Pietrzak (1993, p.46-47), one can distinguish nine myths concerning the perception of deaf people by general public. Thus, hearing people perceive the deaf as those who:

- can do some works only,
- are less intelligent than hearing people,
- have as a social group similar ideals, abilities and the way of perceiving reality,
- all use sign language,
- after losing hearing constitute a group of people who are all the same,
- can lip-read,
- accept noise,
- cannot speak,
- regain hearing when they have hearing aids.

It can be assumed that these myths are connected with untrue opinions about deaf people, lack of knowledge about their abilities; they result also from simplified observation and inability to communicate.

The issue of mental stereotypes and social myths appearing in the opinions of teachers was the subject of research by K. Krakowiak, M. Panasiuk (1994). It turned out that in the opinions of teachers occurred opposing stereotypes concerning deaf young people. In these conceptions one can distinguish two basic stereotypical models, which are present in the thinking of other social groups and in scientific literature. In the first stereotype a deaf person is a hard-bitten cripple, disabled in every aspect, who should be left alone to live a peaceful life. This stereotype has two variants. In more humane variant a deaf person is considered to be a disabled person, disabled psychically, and in another one, this is a deaf person with memory limitations.

Another, opposing mental stereotype is a conviction that deaf people are fully able and they should be treated like hearing people. Such ideal approach to the abilities of the deaf is a result of the fact that teachers and parents do not feel a need to support the development of chronically hard of hearing children. In this version of intellectual disability stereotype the authors distinguished also two sub-types: a deaf person neglected at childhood, whose developmental capabilities were not used by the parents or teachers as well as a stereotype of a hearing impaired person who is very gifted because of hardships in hearing or who lost hearing after mastering speaking skills.

Author's research

In order to diagnose the existing intellectual disability stereotypes and social myths there was research carried out among special education teachers. Empirical material was collected on the basis of a questionnaire, prepared by the author of this paper. 40 teachers employed in Zespół Szkół Specjalnych (Special Schools) no. 42 in Zabrze and 38 teachers working in Specjalny Ośrodek Szkolno-Wychowawczy (Special Educational Institution) in Kraków took part in the research. There were 67 women and 11 men participating in the research. Analysis of the research material results in a conclusion that teachers over 30 years of age (41 of subjects, 52%) constituted the most numerous group. The remaining ones were teachers aged 25 to 30 (25-32%) and there were 14 teachers over 40 (18%). All subjects have a master's degree. Taking into consideration the professional degree, one can conclude that the majority of teachers were appointed teachers (58 subjects, 75%), others were contractual teachers (12- 15%) and certified teachers (8- 10%). In the population under research 62 teachers (80%) finished postgraduate studies in various subjects, also in surdopedagogy.

The analysis of the research material indicated high level of teachers' knowledge on deafness. Defining deafness the subjects observed numerous consequences of hearing impairment. The majority of teachers stated that deafness is a kind of disability (56-72 %) and its effects are most evident in delayed cognitive development. Another group of subjects presented a definition of deafness underlying the consequences in social development (22- 28%). I would like to provide examples of definitions here: "Deafness is a kind of disability which considerably hinders the functioning of a child in society". "For me a little impairment of hearing is a fault with which it is hard to live among the hearing people".

The teachers' knowledge on the causes of deafness is also satisfactory. The subjects could divide factors responsible for hearing impairment into three groups: prenatal, perinatal and postnatal. The causes of deafness which were indicated most often were: mother's illness during pregnancy (31- 40%) and ototoxic effects of medicines in early childhood (26-33 %). There were also teachers who describing in detail the causes of deafness indicated groups of pathogenic factors e.g. Meniere's disease (7-9%) or genetic factors, e.g. Usher syndrome (5-6%), Waardenburgh syndrome (4-5%). Among the factors mentioned they provided also frequent inflammation of the middle ear (15-19%), noise (13-17%), and even wrong usage of mobile phones (4-5%).

Another interesting issue in the research was the teachers' knowledge of preventive measures. Majority of subjects said that one can prevent the occurrence of deafness by using preventive measures at a proper time e.g. vaccination against German measles (23-29,5%), toxoplasmosis (21-27%), withdrawing ototoxic medicines from the market (11-14%), treating ear illnesses until they are fully cured (11-14%) and avoiding noise (9-11,5%). Among the subjects there were 12 appointed teachers (15%), who said that there are causes of deafness which could not be prevented e.g. inherited deafness. Teachers take information on chronically hard of

hearing children's rehabilitation mainly from literature on this subject (65-83%), on the basis of different forms of professional training (7-9 %) and from the Internet (5-6%).

During the research the teachers were also asked to express their opinions about the personality of deaf people. The teachers suggested a set of features characteristic for the deaf. The subjects chose most frequently the features which described negative behaviour of the deaf, such as, inquisitiveness (18-23%), maliciousness (16-20.5%), short temper (13-17%) and aggression (11-15%). Moreover, there appeared features describing the emotional sphere of the deaf e.g. indifference (12-15%) and changeability of moods (8-10%). Most of these features coincide with features ascribed to the deaf in literature on the subject (H. Lane 1996, p.160). It must be said that these are opinions which deprecate deaf people. The subjects expressed their attitude towards the deaf by answering the question: should deaf people have special privileges? There were different opinions on this subject. Almost a half of the teachers (37-47%), mainly those with long work experience, said that the hearing impaired are not entitled to special privileges as they should integrate with the hearing and their should be treated like any other member of society. In their opinions there appeared judgements that the chronically hard of hearing often raise claims (24-36%), they demand free medical tests (18-27%), free hearing aids (17-25%) and additional help of specialists e.g. speech therapists (8-12%).

Deafness has a clear influence on the functioning of a person in numerous spheres of life. According to 63 teachers (81%) deaf persons cannot do some jobs and they listed such professions as: singer, speech therapist, waitress, civil servant. There were also such subjects who claimed that hearing impaired persons cannot be good parents (15-19%). They justified their opinion with their observations, writing that deaf people are irresponsible or egocentric.

At present one of educational challenges is to include deaf children into the integrative system of education. The teachers were sceptical towards this idea. The majority of subjects (30-38.5% definitely not, 28-38% rather not) claimed that deaf children should not learn together with their hearing peers. The others expressed a positive opinion (definitely yes - 15-19%, rather yes - 5-6,5%), but they mentioned the existing barriers in carrying out this concept, e.g. improper attitude of the general public (23-38%), unprepared staff in generally available educational system (21-35 %) and inappropriate facilities and teaching aids 16-27 %).

Opinions of the teachers participating in the research also prove that in the teacher's milieu there exist signs of discrimination. This can be explained by the fact that teachers working within special education belong to the circle of influence of stereotypes and myths on the deaf. In the teacher's opinions there appeared the following evaluations having features of discrimination:

- A deaf person could not be a president (58-49%);
- A deaf person has egoistic attitude towards life and raises numerous claims (24-20%);
- Deaf people cannot fully fulfil their duties as parents (15-13%);
- Deaf people could not accompany hearing people at a party (13-11%);
- A deaf person could not be a teacher's friend (8-7%);

This discrimination has a social character as we can encounter prejudices shown against the deaf due to the typical features of their character. Signs of political discrimination are still evident as educated deaf people cannot perform important political functions. A. Korzon (2006) analysing the evolution of social attitudes towards deaf people – from discrimination to integration, defined a few fields of discrimination. The author

noticed the following fields: education, employment, law, language, transport, tourism, social welfare and television. According to the author, liquidation of these signs of discrimination will be possible if we help the deaf people to accept life with their disability and we let them be themselves i.e. deaf persons.

Conclusions

The research conducted showed that special education teachers have a high level of knowledge about deaf people but in their opinions there appear numerous social mental stereotypes and myths. It is alarming that special teachers present convictions with so strong negative emotional tinge. One can expect that the reasons for these evaluations are lack of acceptance, unwillingness to work with the deaf and inability to establish contacts. According the subjects only 38% teachers finished a sign language course. A question should be asked: Do the subjects find fulfilment in their profession and does the job of a special teacher meet their expectations?

In the context of results obtained, it seems necessary to suggest postulates for teachers, in order to reduce the occurrence of mental myths and stereotypes in their opinions. Teachers should:

- Update their knowledge on the rehabilitation of the deaf.
- See and evaluate deaf people individually as everyone has a different potential of skills and knowledge.
- Participate in common trips, parties, as this can help in integration of the hearing and the deaf, as well as strengthen emotional bounds.
- Make themselves familiar with scientific achievements of educated hearing impaired people.
- Remember that deaf people have the right to be themselves.

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