

## Intellectually disabled students – perpetrators and victims of electronic aggression

There is a richness of diversity in terms of questions which are taken up in professional literature devoted to intellectual disability. On the other hand, there are some knowledge gaps. One of them is lack of research projects exploring usage patterns of modern communication technologies<sup>1</sup>, particularly with regards to potential risks such as involvement in cyberbullying<sup>2</sup> or escape to “virtual world” and withdrawal from interpersonal contacts.

Limited social skills and other features (e.g. lack of successes, strong need of acceptance, low self-esteem) accompanying intellectual disability, in connection with specific characteristics of modern technologies, can cause serious consequences, both in individual and social sense. According to Samuel W. Flynt & Rhonda Collins Morton [2004] “children with mental retardation are prime candidates for being bullied<sup>3</sup>. They tend to have low self-esteem, look to others for cues or guidance, and lack the awareness to realize that potentially dangerous situations are occurring. Moderate to low functioning children with mental retardation are more likely to suffer from motor skill deficits, or physical and health impairments that make them easier marks for bullies seeking weaker victims” – also in “cyberspace” [Plichta, 2009]. Subsequent problem, related to potential risk of being harmed, is fact, that “(...) disabled people have been regarded as unreliable witnesses [Gudjonsson, 2003; Hershkowitz et al., 2007] because of their poor memories, their susceptibility to suggestion, and their limited descriptive capacities [Perlman, Ericson, Esses, & Isaacs, 1994].

It occurs, that the intellectually disabled adolescents are also perpetrators of aggression. Beyond doubt, the mechanisms of aggression are common for people with or

---

<sup>1</sup>It regards to both, polish as well as the foreign literature. Robert Didden's (et al.) research on prevalence of cyberbullying in the field of special education is the exception to the rule. Robert Didden's et al., *Cyberbullying among students with intellectual and developmental disability in special education settings*, *Developmental Neurorehabilitation*, 2009, Vol. 12 (3), p. 146-151.

<sup>2</sup>“willful and repeated harm inflicted through the medium of electronic text” Hinduja S. & J. W. Patchin [2008, p. 129]

<sup>3</sup>The examples of the researches on greater likelihood (for disabled people) to become a victim are also: Marini, Fairbairn & Zuber, 2001; Mishna, 2003; Whitney, Smith & Thompson, 1994, Little, 2004; Hershkowitz et al., 2007. Relevant to our considerations is term: “safe targets” [Williams, 2005] describing disabled people as potential victims.

without intellectual disability. Even though, it is worth mentioning, that a few factors can highlight the background of occurrence of aggressive behaviour in the intellectually disabled persons. For example, in agreement with Zdzisław Bartkowicz [1984] and Adam Mikrut [2000], aggression among mentally retarded people is more related to the effect of instigation, peers' pressure and willingness to attract somebody's attention. More frequently, than TD (*typically developing*), they experience other people's aggression, therefore many of aggression acts are retaliation and may result from being attacked.

“Using new modern communication technologies by young people – particularly the Internet and mobile phones as the means to conduct aggressive acts is attracting more and more attention among researchers and the general public. (...) What distinguishes electronic aggression from traditional aggression is connected to tools used by perpetrators to conduct harmful acts. Electronic aggression is carried out through new communication technologies and may be conducted via a great number of various behaviors [Dooley J., Pyżalski J. & Cross D., 2009]. In this article, electronic aggression has a broad meaning and refers to all hostile acts with usage of modern technologies. Such meaning of electronic aggression “covers a wide range of behaviors that are qualitatively different with respect to a number of social aspects involved in particular situations. For example, the mechanisms of electronic aggression may differ when aimed at a victim known in the real world, at a person known only in cyberspace or a stranger (e.g. a celebrity person) or a group of people (e.g. racial/sexual minority). (...) Another important aspect is connected to the fact that some electronic aggression acts are targeted directly at a victim (e.g. someone sends vulgar e-mails, MNS messages) while the other harm a victim indirectly (e.g. someone posts unwanted visual material about a victim on the Internet or spread rumors)” [Pyżalski, 2009, p.15].

## Methodology

The presented data is a part of ongoing research (2-years internal grant of The Pedagogy Academy in Lodz; coordinator – Piotr Plichta, Ph.D., in cooperation with Jacek Pyżalski, Ph.D. – project FWN/8/2008-2010). The main purpose of the research is to outline ICT (*Information and Communication Technology*) usage, especially: cell phones and Internet, among mild mentally retarded adolescents aged 13-17. The strong emphasis is put on a question of being a victim and/or a perpetrator of electronic aggression. The data was obtained with the unstructured interviews (qualitative approach) in the field of special education (non-inclusive settings). The sample consists of 23 students (17 of them are boys) attending special schools in Lodz. The research was conducted between the march and april 2009. Apart from such categories like: “Unpleasure experiences affilcted via Internet or cell phones” and “Being a perpetrator of electronic aggression” the research revealed several questions related to patterns of ICT usage (based on respondents' opinions):

- Personal meaning and significance of ICT usage,
- Time devoted for using the Internet,
- Parental control and family context of ICT usage,

- Declared range of ICT usage,
- Awareness of potential dangers (related to Internet and other forms of electronic communication),
- Amount of SMS sending per day,
- Educational application of new media and perceived role of schools in shaping ICT competencies.

## Being a victim of electronic aggression

The respondents almost unanimously acknowledged, that usage of ICT gives them positive experiences. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning, that almost half of the students admit unpleasure, negative experiences, also very serious, like receiving threats or sexual proposals (*“I was lured by a paedophile”*). A few respondents mentioned about their friends’ nasty experiences, e.g. placing their personal photos on the Web without permission. Another of the students’ friend received such a comment related (in perpetrators’ point of view) to his appearance – *“you look like a gay”*.

The examined students put strong emphasis on their “web image” – It is remarkably related to their personal photos on profiles available on social networking websites: *“I got one annoying comment about my appearance in the photo (...)”*. How they are perceived, what people could think about them and how visitors evaluate their profiles - it is a matter of great importance, which is distinctively explicated in respondents’ opinions.

The following issue, derived from the interviews, is the jealousy as a main motive assigned by the victims (mainly girls) to the perpetrators. *“I got a nasty SMS from my best friend (...) She was jealous of my boyfriend. I wrote to her that R. is not her property, that she couldn’t forbid me to meet him (...) and she stopped writing and offending me”*. Via messenger I was insulted by my classmate (...). *To pay him back, I did the same”*. According to the respondent, she was attacked because the perpetrator was talked into by jealous classmates. *“Nobody likes me in school. It is possible to say, that they are jealous of my clothes. This jealousy is also of boys, that I have more colleagues form school, that I communicate via Internet with them”*. The respondent was also picked on by the cell phone *“Sometimes they called and offended me”*.

The following student reported his way of responding to unpleasant situations on the Web: *“If slimy remark happens, then I remove it (...)”* and: *“I got such messages: for example: You are f\*\*\*g Jews. When we catch you we beat you up. Remove your photos – you look like a muff. I don’t care about their threats. We will see what happens if they find me”*.

Several interviewees described examples of occurrences, which one of them interprets as a “jokes” e.g. warnings or threats sent from unknown telephone number. *“Be ready. We’ll be in a few minutes”* or *“I was insulted”*. Another example: *“They called from the ex-directory phone number and they said, that they would brake my bones and so on”*.

One of the respondents reported lack of fear despite the fact of being attacked via cell phone: R (respondent): *“I told him to shut up (...) If he phoned again, I would hung up.*

I (interviewer): *And? ...and he resigned and don’t call any more. I: Were you scared when he was threatening you? Yes (irony)..., I can phone and scare somebody, too”*.

Another example which proves receiving phone calls, including threats, is consecutive student's statement: "*I was intimidated two times*". The respondent was sure who was the perpetrator and she says "*It was my classmate. She did it because of boredom*". The next respondent describes what he has experienced: "*Somebody broke into my online-game account*". Responding to interviewer question who could do it, the respondent stated: "*It has to be an Englishman (...). People are angry with each other while they are playing net games*". Even though, some respondents have not experienced any difficult situation related to using computer or/and cell phone, they are often able to give the examples of unpleasure cases of their colleagues and friends.

To be a victim in the research, first of all, means receiving annoying messages, phone calls and bad remarks of their profiles on the social networks' websites. The respondents interpret as it was done by chance, as a kind of jokes or youth boredom. The interviewed students generally ignore such events and do not respond. In two cases, reaction is an equivalent to the received offence. Regarding the girls, the motive of jealousy is very distinct.

### **Being a perpetrator of electronic aggression**

Approximately, one third of the respondents (seven out of twenty three respondents) give the examples of undertaking aggressive actions with using the ICT<sup>4</sup>. The cases are diversified in terms of the level of jeopardy. Some of them have relatively little annoying character, meanwhile another should be interpreted as a serious and potentially harmful for the victim. Also, some of the cases were continued in "real life". A few respondents should be regarded both, as a victim as well as a perpetrator of online aggression. For example, one of the perpetrators describes: "*I was hooked in the Web*". According to him, it was caused by the photo presenting him in the t-shirt with logo of the football club. The respondent recognized who was the doer of such attack, found him and "*I bashed him in the face and he stopped bothering me*". As we can see, this is an example of "stretching" the online situation to the offline circumstances.

Another example of destructive use of Internet is searching the Web to find a profile with the pictures of the males with long hair and making rude comments ("*Go to the hairdresser*") and other accusations (with offensive words) of being a gay, related to the custom of having such hairstyle, in perpetrator's opinion. Some of the respondents indicate connection between aggression via Web and with everyday, "face to face" contacts. Sometimes, aggression activities have indirect character e.g. recording video materials with teachers or sending among classmates sms's with nasty comments about the teachers the perpetrators do not like.

In the subsequent dialogue with the interviewer (I), the respondent (R) revealed attacking electronically somebody who had marked his profile with unsatisfactory rank: (I) "*Have you ever written any hostile comments on somebody's profile, for example, on*

<sup>4</sup>It is worth mentioning that such result is higher than in the research of TD (typically developing) adolescents [Pyzalski, 2009], where 16 percent of respondents confess to be engaged in online aggression. Regarding the other way of obtaining the data and differences in the size of sample the reasons from such comparison are limited and comparison has only "rough" character.

*'Fotka', that you didn't enjoy it or something? (R), Yes, I posted, one time only, comment. She gave me 'one'. She reduced my mean score. So, I wrote Her: You are f\*\*\*\*g bitch. I had given you 10 points and you.... You know what I mean". Nevertheless, the respondent objected behaving in this manner more frequently. "No, nowadays I don't write such things (...). It was my cousin who talked me into this<sup>5</sup>". One of the respondents, as he claimed, had received a message with sexual offer: "Then I told him: F\*\*k off. I am not a gay. I don't like such people".*

The state of boredom as a reason for undertaking improper actions via Internet or cell phones is revealed by one of the respondents. *"I was calling people I hadn't known (...) I simply made them up"*, which means that sometimes the victim is chosen randomly.

Few respondents describe the situations which are not direct electronic aggression but have indirect character and are potentially harmful for the other people: *"I have taken a picture of my classmate – she is funny. I have it in my mobile"*. Another category revealed in interviews are "jokes". One of the respondents describes the following situation: *"We dialed our colleague's number and we said: You have ordered the pizza number seven. In a five minutes we will come"*.

## Conclusions

Of course, the presented data have only preliminary character (e.g because of small sample and the fact, that the research is still in progress) and therefore the range of conclusions is also limited. Nevertheless, the obtained data may be useful for both: practitioners (particularly, special educators) as well as researchers. Educators can utilize it e.g. for creating workshops aimed at preventing victimization among intellectually disabled students. In preparing activities aimed at developing self-protective skills it is worth to take into consideration following features relevant to intellectual disability:

1. Susceptibility to media manipulation (mainly addressed to consumption)
2. Acceptance and acquisition of negative and simplified patterns of behaviours
3. Inability to deep, critical analysis of the ambiguous, compound, provocative content
4. Difficulties in recognizing contextual, spatial and time relations
5. Limited ability to reflective and evaluative reception of selected aspects of New Media
6. Mechanism of seeking and modeling oneself behaviour upon persons without learning difficulties [Krause, 2004].

For the researchers is possible to make comparisons between the data obtained from examining special needs' respondents and results of general population. Additional advantage of the research outcomes is its qualitative character with very interesting, illustrative respondents' statements showing importance of New Media in life (e.g. *"There is no life at all without Internet"*) or describing advantages of using mediated (via ICT) communication (e.g. *"I prefer sending SMS, because when I talk and hear peo-*

---

<sup>5</sup> It proves the role of provoking by the others as a "trigger factor" in aggressive behaviour among mentally retarded persons.

*ple's voices, mhm... I am ashamed then, and by SMS's it is possible to chat more comfortable, I don't need to hurry, or something"; „It is better to communicate via Internet than face to face”).*

One of the most important issues which arose from the research is to limit the risk of learning through substitute experiences. In process of education of the Intellectually Disabled it is crucial to exercise “life through life” which e.g. means experience of real significant contacts with other people. Sometimes „New Media” are a kind of escape from reality and are unbeneficial „filling” in their spare time. Certainly, ways of New Media usage should be included to “absent plots<sup>6</sup>” in the field of special education.

### References:

1. Bartkowicz Z. (1984): *Nieletni z obniżoną sprawnością umysłową w zakładzie poprawczym*, Wyd. UMCS, Lublin.
2. Benedict M. et al. (1990): *Reported maltreatment in children with multiple disabilities*. Child Abuse and Neglect, 14, p. 207–215.
3. Flynt S. W. & Collins Morton R. (2004): *Bullying and Children with Disabilities*, Journal of Instructional Psychology, Dec, 2004, p.330-333.
4. Hershkowitz et al. (2007): *Victimization of Children With Disabilities*, American Journal of Orthopsychiatry 2007, Vol. 77, No. 4, p. 629–635.
5. Hinduja S. & J. W. Patchin (2008): *Cyberbullying: an exploratory analysis of factors related to offending and victimization*, Deviant Behavior, 29, pp.129-156, Taylor & Francis Group.
6. Little, L. (2004): *Victimization of children with disabilities*, in: Kendall-Tackett K. A. (ed.), *Health consequences of abuse in the family: A clinical guide for evidence-based practice*, Washington DC: American Psychological Association, p. 95-108.
7. Krause A. (2004): *Człowiek niepełnosprawny wobec przeobrażeń społecznych*. Impuls, Kraków.
8. Marini Z. A. et al. (2001): *Peer harassment in individuals with developmental disabilities: Towards the development of a multidimensional bullying identification model*, *Developmental Disabilities Bulletin*, 29, p. 170-195.
9. Mikrut A. (2000): *Próba wyjaśnienia związku między agresją i upośledzeniem umysłowym*, in: Pańczyk J. (ed.) *Roczniki Pedagogiki specjalnej* No. 11, WSPS, Warszawa, p. 30-40.
10. Mishna, F. (2003): *Learning disabilities and bullying: Double jeopardy*, Journal of Learning Disabilities, 36(4), p. 336-347.
11. Perlman, N. B., Ericson, K. I., Esses, V. M., & Isaacs, B. J. (1994): *The developmentally handicapped witness: Competency as a function of question format*. Law and Human Behavior, 18, p. 171–187.
12. Plichta P. (2009): *Młodzież upośledzono umysłowo w świecie nowoczesnych technologii komunikacyjnych*, *Kwartalnik Pedagogiczny*, Wyd. UW, Warszawa (In press).

<sup>6</sup> According to Zenon Gajdzica's term used in, edited by him, publishing series on special education issues in Publishing House “Impuls”.

13. Dooley J., Pyżalski J., Cross D. (2009): *Cyberbullying Versus Face-to-Face Bullying: A Theoretical and Conceptual Review*, in: *Zeitschrift für Psychologie / Journal of Psychology* (in press).
14. Pyżalski J. (2009b): *Agresja elektroniczna dzieci i młodzieży – różne wymiary zjawiska*, Dziecko krzywdzone. Teoria. Badania. Praktyka nr 1 (26) 2009 „Cyberprzemoc”, p. 12-26.
15. Westcott H. L. (1991): *The abuse of disabled children: A review of the literature*. *Child: Care, Health and Development*, 17, p. 243–258.
16. Whitney I. et al. (1994): *Bullying and children with special needs*, in: Smith P.K. & Sharp S. (ed.), *School bullying: Insights and perspectives*, Routledge, London, p.213-240.
17. Williams C. (1995): *Invisible victims: Crime and abuse against people with learning difficulties*, Jessica Kingsley, London.

