

Aleksander Wróblewski

Studying People with Disabilities in the Opinion of Colleagues

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dozwolonego użytku.

Aleksander Wróblewski

STUDYING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN THE OPINION OF COLLEAGUES

Abstract

This article refers to disability as an individual and social problem. In the theoretical part different ways of defining and perceiving people with disabilities were shown in the light of the literature. In contrast, the empirical part of the article presents the author's own research.

STUDIUJĄCE OSOBY NIEPEŁNOSPRAWNE W OPINII KOLEGÓW

Streszczenie

Artykuł odwołuje się do niepełnosprawności, jako problemu indywidualnego i społecznego. W części teoretycznej przedstawiono różne sposoby definiowania i postrzegania osób niepełnosprawnych w świetle literatury, natomiast część empiryczna artykułu przedstawia badania własne.

Introduction

The support which disabled people need plays an important role at the start of their career. Both the disabled and their colleagues need to show great commitment aiming to gain qualifications which will allow the former to take up a job. Facing barriers which need to be overcome brings a disabled, as well as their colleagues, a number of beneficial and relevant guidelines which are being helpful while developing one's qualifications.

The author's activity aimed to show the barriers occurring within a group among students, and whether these enabled some people to understand disabled people's problems, whereas the disabled found it easier, more practical to gain professional qualifications and develop. It is important, within one's intentions, to be willing to verify the problem with respect to disabled people's activity in class, as well as how their cooperation works in class.

Disability as an individual and social problem

Nothing is certain, nor understood in the same way, in a person's life. Just like the notion of life is interpreted variously, depending on the frame of reference assumed, e.g. culture,

disability, alike, may not be encompassed by one definition. There are various definitions of disability, as attitudes, beliefs, cultural orientation and scientific disciplines vary. Various scientific disciplines offer different definitions of disability. Some of them focus on common features which are characteristic for a given group of people (e.g. their cognitive skills, way of moving), others are characterized by more sociological or medical approach, presenting disability as a social construct – being a feature of the social system rather than an individual trait.

The knowledge acquired, as well as the results obtained by authors studying disability, bore fruit in the form of various approaches to the issue of disability and the disabled person him/herself.

According to D.D. Smith, disabled people can be any age at any age, of any race, creed, nationality, sex and sexual orientation, who require continued support in one or a number of professional activities in order to be able to partake of the integrated society and experience a quality of life similar to the one accessible to all people. Support may be needed in such activities of daily living as moving around, transport, self-service and education preparing a person to lead an independent life, be employed and self-sufficient¹. The above general definition of disability was the starting point for the research, perception of a disabled person. Disability is a state in which some functional limitations of an individual appear. These limitations may be caused by decreased fitness or mental ability. It can also be a loss or defect of the body, either inborn or acquired, its occurrence may be temporary or permanent.

Disability is also a state of an individual which is characterized by occurrence of certain deficits in one's physical and/or mental development, complete or partial in nature, permanent or transitory, precluding (or significantly impeding) performance of life tasks in accordance with legal and social standards. Determining the degree of disability as mild, moderate or severe, biological, social and occupational criteria are taken into consideration. Rehabilitation of people with disabilities includes coordinated therapeutic, psychological and socio-occupational activities, aiming to restore lost abilities and enable an individual to lead an independent life within the society².

A disabled person may be characterized by two fundamental criteria: the subjective and objective. According to the first criterion, a disabled person is everyone who considers him/herself as disabled. His/her subjective conviction that due to a permanent bodily injury he/she is not able to cope with regular requirements of the milieu results in his/her treating him/herself in a special way. An objective criterion of recognizing disability should be: (a) universal, i.e. it should pertain to all people with a permanent impairment of the body; (b) precise, i.e. it should prevent inaccurate inclusion – by means of subjective criteria – of people into this category or exclusion from it of people with a permanent impairment of the

¹ D.D. Smith, *Pedagogika specjalna*, Warszawa 2009, p. 311.

² C. Kupisiewicz, M. Kupisiewicz, *Słownik pedagogiczny*, Warszawa 2009, p. 117.

body; and (c) justified by real facts, i.e. it should be derived from theoretical knowledge which has been confirmed by appropriate empirical studies regarding the relevant value of the criterion applied³.

Social problems related to disability comprise almost all aspects of a person's life, starting from problems with adaptation of the external environment to the needs of a disabled person, up to specific issues of an individual. They arise, in their majority, from, among others, a clash of the standards of coexistence, legal system, attitudes, social role concepts, educational and occupational prospects, family and social life, architectural, town-planning and transport obstacles with a certain deficit which is characteristic of a disabled person.

Adaptation is one of the basic social processes. Therefore, this problem is frequently subjected to research. The term „adaptation” is generally used both in informal speech and in scientific disciplines. “Social adaptation”: 1) Psychology: The process or result of a process which a person's psychology undergoes in a pursuit of a state of balance between the individual needs and the requirements of the social environment; 2) Sociology: The process of adaptation of individuals or groups to a specific social reality enabling effective operation in new situations”⁴.

Undertaking an attempt to define a socio-psychological situation of young people with disabilities, one needs to consider the question of what consequences the transformation of the modern world has with respect to this group of people⁵. Disabled students' activities within the academic reality requires a lot of sacrifice from them, as well as the adaptation described above. Overcoming successive difficulties in fulfilling one's duties makes one stronger, educates him/her, teaches new ways of coping with hardships. People with disabilities often experience the sense of dependence, when others need to help them in everyday activities, such as eating, getting dressed, washing them. There are still numerous architectural or transport barriers, as well as problems converting verbal or non-verbal information, expressing replies. Able-bodied people should, in the author's opinion, support the disabled (but not replace them), make them feel appreciated, needed, loved or even indispensable.

In the source literature, support is defined as a specific way and kind of helping individuals and groups, mainly in order to stimulate their powers, potential and resources which they have retained, so that they can cope with their problems on their own. Support offered to disabled people and their families consists in applying such forms of aid that by using the existing and retained abilities the most optimal way of independent, active and creative life is shown. Depending on the type of support offered, it is divided into the following: information support, emotional support, financial support, provision of services, developmental support⁶.

³ H. Sęk, *Psychologia kliniczna* (ed.), Volume 2, Warszawa 2006, p. 274.

⁴ *Podręczna encyklopedia PWN*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2002, p. 712

⁵ T. Cierpiałowska, *Studenci z niepełnosprawnością, problemy funkcjonowania edukacyjnego i psychospołecznego*, Kraków 2009.

⁶ H. Sęk, R. Cieślak, *Wsparcie społeczne, stres i zdrowie*, Warszawa 2004, pp.11-28.

Thanks to support from various organizations, disabled people are offered rehabilitation, possibility to develop and overcome barriers. As far as education is concerned, the disabled may receive aid from the State Fund for Rehabilitation of Disabled Persons. Depending on the type of disability, degree of involvement, developmental needs, co-financing is offered enabling implementation of educational plans at the tertiary level.

For a long time, disabled were treated as people living on the margins of society, who needed care and being provided the conditions for existence; independence and social usefulness was not expected from them. Recently, not only in Poland but in other countries as well, a change has occurred in social mentality and practical activities in aid of disabled. This offered access to educational, occupational and social activity⁷.

A relationship between the understanding of disability and development of rehabilitation was observed by T. Witkowski. He showed a correspondence with respect to two pairs of terms: invalidism vs. rehabilitation and disability vs. rehabilitation. The source of the notion in the first configuration is the Latin *validus*, whereas the second one – the Latin *habilis*⁸. In relation with the first correspondence, as well as the universal right to education, a disabled person's education influences his/her rehabilitation as well, both social and occupational.

The advantages of having a tertiary education, consisting in implementation of the objectives and tasks of education at the tertiary level and constituting fulfilment of the function of a tertiary institution, are multiple and unquestionable for every student, irrespective of his/her ability⁹. There are three sets of arguments which support education of disabled people at the tertiary level. These include, as follows: advantages for the participants in the teaching process at a tertiary institution (abled students, academic teachers); advantages for other disabled people; advantages for the society at large.

The above mentioned advantages pertain to students of all faculties. One may assume that abled young people on the threshold of adulthood, who have never before associated with a disabled person themselves, are – in a way – socially disabled, as they are unable to enter into a satisfying interpersonal relationship with “THE OTHERS”. Thus, being in touch with a disabled collegemate is an opportunity for them to make up for the lack of experience from their earlier years. Due to the segregational system of education which had been in force in our country until recently, they did not have a chance to learn and understand that although not everyone functions in the same way, still everybody has the right to pursue his/her needs and aspirations¹⁰.

The words of Pope John Paul II may serve as a synthesis of the favourable influence of disabled people: “Illness and suffering is always an ordeal. Still, the world without ill people

⁷ H. Ochonczenko, G. Miłkowska (eds.), *Osoba niepełnosprawna w społeczności akademickiej*, Kraków 2005

⁸ J. Kirenko, *Oblicza niepełnosprawności*, Lublin 2006, p.16.

⁹ T. Cierpiałowska, *Studenci z niepełnosprawnością, problemy funkcjonowania edukacyjnego i psychospołecznego*, Kraków 2009.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

would – paradoxically though it may seem – be a poorer world”¹¹. This statement by the eminent Pole confirms the fact that suffering, hard work, may bear fruit – also in case of disabled people.

Methodological assumptions

The research aimed to establish a picture of a disabled person within the academic community. For this purpose, the following research problem was posed: “in what way are disabled people perceived by their collegemates?”.

In order to fulfil the aim of the research, the diagnostic survey method was applied, using purpose sampling of the research group. The respondents studied pedagogy, i.e. the field of study where particular attention is paid to the problem of deficits and special needs of various categories of people, as well as the methods of assisting them in the process of development. In order to observe the differences concerning the level of education, as acquired, students were examined doing bachelor, master and postgraduate studies. For the purpose of execution of the goal, i.e. carrying out the survey, a research tool was created, this being a survey questionnaire including the total of 31 questions, closed and half-open ones.

The survey was carried out in the academic year 2009/2010, among students of the University of Zielona Gora, Faculty of Education, Sociology and Health Sciences. The research included 115 respondents altogether.

Students’ opinions about disabled people

I will present the perception of disabled students by their fully abled collegemates attending the same class based on the results obtained of the research, as done.

Table 1. Presence of a disabled person in the class

Response	Studies						Total	
	Bachelor		Master		Postgraduate		N°	%
	N°	%	N°	%	N°	%		
Yes	8	11.3	25	100.0	18	94.7	51	44.4
No	53	74.6	0	0.0	1	5.3	54	47.0
Do not know	8	11.3	0	0.0	0	0.0	8	6.9
No response	2	2.8	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	1.7
Total	71	100.0	25	100.0	19	100.0	115	100.0

Source: Author’s own study.

¹¹ John Paul II, [in:] K. Dykcik, *Elementarz Jana Pawła II dla wierzącego, wątpiącego i szukającego*, Kraków 2001.

Fewer than the half of the respondents were aware of the presence of disabled people in the class (Table 1); just as many claimed that there were no such people in their classes. On the other hand, almost 7% stated they did not know this. The respondents who did not answer this question at all comprised 1.7% of the entire number of people included in the survey – these were only bachelor students. Out of the respondents who were doing their postgraduate studies, only one person stated that he/she did not notice any disabled people in his/her class.

Table 2. Frequency of meeting disabled people at the University of Zielona Gora

Possibility	Studies						Total	
	Bachelor		Master		Postgraduate			
	N ^o	%	N ^o	%	N ^o	%	N ^o	%
Regularly	9	12.7	16	64.0	6	31.6	31	26.9
Sometimes	38	53.5	5	20.0	6	31.6	49	42.6
Hardly ever	23	32.4	4	16.0	7	36.8	34	29.6
Never	1	1.4	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	0.9
No response	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Total	71	100.0	25	100.0	19	100.0	115	100.0

Source: Author's own study

According to the information contained in Table 2, fewer than a half of the respondents considered that they met disabled people. Another group, almost one third of the respondent, comprised people who rarely met the disabled – in both cases these were bachelor students who made up a majority. Regular meetings were declared by over one fourth of the respondents – here master students constituted the biggest group. Only one person (a student of bachelor studies) stated that he/she had never met disabled people.

Table 3. Disabled people's possibility to study in collegemates' opinion

Possibility	Studies						Total	
	Bachelor		Master		Postgraduate			
	N ^o	%	N ^o	%	N ^o	%	N ^o	%
Definitely yes	52	73.2	15	60.0	11	57.9	78	67.8
Rather yes	18	25.4	10	40.0	8	42.1	36	31.3
Rather no	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Definitely no	1	1.4	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	0.9
Total	71	100.0	25	100.0	19	100.0	115	100.0

Source: Author's own study.

Almost all respondents were positive about disabled people's possibility to study – The response „Definitely yes” was given twice as often as the response „Rather yes”. There was

no response „Definitely no”, whereas one bachelor student claimed that disabled people should rather not study (which was 0.9% of all the responses).

Table 4. Respondents’ perception of a disabled person

Response	Studies						Total	
	Bachelor		Master		Postgraduate			
	N ^o	%	N ^o	%	N ^o	%	N ^o	%
Positive	21	27.6	22	84.6	16	72.7	59	47.6
It is of no importance to me	25	32.9	2	7.7	5	22.7	32	25.8
I do not know whether there are disabled people in my year/class	26	34.2	0	0.0	1	4.6	27	21.8
Other	4	5.3	2	7.7	0	0.0	6	4.8
They intrigue me	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Total	76	100.0	26	100.0	22	100.0	124	100.0

Author’s own study

A group’s perception of disabled people is illustrated by the data included in Table 4. Within the closed question it was possible to choose more than one answer; therefore, a total of 124 were given. Disabled people are perceived positively in nearly one half of the responses. Disability is of no importance in more than one fourth of the responses. Fewer than one quarter do not know whether there are disabled people in the year or class. No one chose the possibility „They intrigue me”. The option „Other” was selected by few respondents, who, simultaneously considered that there were no disabled people in the class; they were not in touch with disabled people; they treat the disabled normally, just like any other person in the class.

Table 5. Disabled people’s problems noticed by their collegemates

Possibility	Studies						Total	
	Bachelor		Master		Postgraduate			
	N ^o	%	N ^o	%	N ^o	%	N ^o	%
Problems moving around	2	3.1	9	24.3	8	30.8	19	14.9
Walking with crutches, a cane	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Using a wheelchair	1	1.6	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	0.9
Problems communicating – speech	6	9.4	24	64.9	10	38.5	40	31.5
Problems communicating – sight	3	4.7	1	2.7	6	23.1	10	7.9
Problems communicating – hearing	5	7.8	3	8.1	0	0.0	8	6.3
Other	3	4.7	0	0.0	2	7.6	5	3.9
No disabled people	44	68.7	0	0.0	0	0.0	44	34.6
Total	64	100.0	37	100.0	26	100.0	127	100.0

Source: Author’s own study.

Disabled people's problems (in the opinion of their abled mates) are presented in Table 5 above. The respondent could select more than one answer – thus a total of 127 were obtained. The most frequently observed problem was that disabled people have difficulty communication – almost every third response indicated this. Nearly 15% of the answers referred to various problems moving, wherein these did not concern walking with crutches or a cane. One respondent indicated the need to use a wheelchair while moving around. Indications pertaining to the other problems functioning did not exceed 4% (the respondents gave no additional explanations while choosing this option).

Table 6. Disabled people's involvement in the class

Possibility	Studies						Total	
	Bachelor		Master		Postgraduate			
	N ^o	%	N ^o	%	N ^o	%	N ^o	%
Definitely yes	33	46,5	14	56,0	14	73,7	61	53,0
Rather yes	26	36,6	11	44,0	5	26,3	43	37,4
Rather no	0	0,0	0	0,0	0	0,0	0	0,0
Definitely no	0	0,0	0	0,0	0	0,0	0	0,0
No response	12	16,9	0	0,0	0	0,0	11	9,6
Total	71	100,0	25	100,0	19	100,0	115	100,0

Source: Author's own study

The degree of disabled peoples' involvement in the class work was obtained responding the question: Can you count on a disabled person's help in class? 104 respondents gave their answers, which comprised 90.4% of the entire group. The respondents who participated only confirmed disabled people's involvement in class. The remaining ones. On the other hand, did not give an answer to this question.

Table 7. A disabled person's activity within his/her students'

Possibility	Studies						Total	
	Bachelor		Master		Postgraduate			
	N ^o	%	N ^o	%	N ^o	%	N ^o	%
He/she tries to draw people's attention to him/herself	0	0.0	4	10.0	0	0.0	4	2.4
He/she is helpful in every situation	11	11.0	15	37.5	8	29.6	34	20.3
He/she is ambitious in the class	12	12.0	7	17.5	10	37.1	29	17.4
He/she tries to go unnoticed	12	12.0	3	7.5	2	7.4	17	10.2
He/she helps, explains, gives advice, coaches for free	6	6.0	7	17.5	2	7.4	15	9.0
He/she occupies organizational positions	4	4.0	1	2.5	2	7.4	7	4.2

He/she counts on other people's help	7	7.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	7	4.2
Other	5	5.0	1	2.5	0	0.0	6	3.6
I am a disabled person myself	2	2.0	2	5.0	2	7.4	6	3.6
I do not know disabled people in my class	41	41.0	0	0.0	1	3.7	42	25.1
Total	100	100.0	40	100.0	27	100.0	167	100.0

Source: Author's own study.

The questions about disabled people's perceived activity was a closed one in form, and the respondent were given a possibility to choose more than one answer. A total of 167 responses were obtained. The most frequently chosen activity of disabled people was stating that he/she is helpful in every situation. Despite the fact that each possibility could be chosen, each successive one was less and less frequent.

Table 8. The respondents' cooperation with disabled people in class

Possibilities	Studies						Total	
	Bachelor		Master		Postgraduate			
	N ^o	%	N ^o	%	N ^o	%	N ^o	%
Yes, willingly	17	23.9	21	84.0	17	89.4	55	47.8
No	32	45.1	0	0.0	1	5.3	33	28.7
Sometimes	4	5.7	2	8.0	1	5.3	7	6.1
Yes, if I have to	3	4.2	1	4.0	0	0.0	4	3.5
I avoid cooperating with them	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
I am the only disabled person in my class	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
No response	15	21.1	1	4.0	0	0.0	16	13.9
Total	71	100.0	25	100.0	19	100.0	115	100.0

Source: Author's own study.

Almost one half of the respondents (47.8% of the total number of responses) stated that they willingly cooperate with disabled people. Together with the ones who considered that they engaged in cooperation with disabled people if they had to, this made nearly two thirds of the respondents. It is comforting that none of the participants in the survey avoided cooperation. One third of the answers to this question were about no cooperation with the disabled.

Table 9. Types of aid offered to a disabled person

Possibilities	Total	
	N ^o	%
Companionship	50	29.6
Helping to overcome barriers to moving around	36	21.3
Helping in class	11	6.5
Preparing for class	7	4.1
Always when there is a need	64	38
Other	1	0.5
Total	168	100

Source: Author's own study.

Over one third of the respondents considered that they always help disabled people. In the opinion of fewer than one third of the respondents, their help consist of being companions, whereas over one fifth actively assisted the disabled in overcoming barriers to moving around. The other respondents indicated help in class, preparation for classes, one person marked "Other" possibilities, however he/she did not provide an explanation.

Table 10. The circumstances in which a disabled person is offered assistance

Assistance depending on:	Responses	
	N ^o	%
The respondent's mood	4	3.1
Whether someone can see me	1	0.8
He/she just offers assistance	102	79.7
He/she never offers assistance	0	0
Having free time	11	8.6
The respondent's attitude towards this person	10	7.8
Total	128	100.0

Source: Author's own study.

In nearly 80% of the respondents declared offering assistance to disabled person on an unselfish basis. Assistance offered by ca. 8% of the respondents depends on their having free time and attitude towards the person assisted. In 4 cases, respondent's mood was indicated, as the determinant for offering such assistance.

Table 11. The circumstances in which a disabled person is refused assistance

Possibilities	Studies						Total	
	Bachelor		Master		Postgraduate			
	N ^o	%	N ^o	%	N ^o	%	N ^o	%
I am always ready to help	44	57.1	14	48.3	8	42.1	66	52.8
If he/she can do it him/herself	18	23.4	10	34.5	8	42.1	36	28.8
If I am in a hurry really	10	13.0	3	10.3	3	15.8	16	12.8

If somebody else can do it	4	5.2	1	3.4	0	0.0	5	4.0
Other	1	1.3	1	3.5	0	0.0	2	1.6
I have never been sensitive to their problems	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Total	77	100.0	29	100.0	19	100.0	125	100.0

Source: Author's own study.

Table 11 compiles the circumstances in which a disabled person is refused an assistance. 100% of the respondents answered this question, giving, in total, 125 responses. Over a half of the respondents is always ready to help, never refuse to assist disabled people, whereas more than one fourth of the answers pertains to refusing help if the disabled person can do it by him/herself. Being in a hurry was the reason for refusing assistance in but a few answers, and in five cases the respondents refuse to help if they see that somebody else can offer assistance. Only two people chose another reason (however, not specifying it).

Conclusion

The survey carried out among students of the Faculty of Education, Sociology and Health Sciences (major: pedagogy) of the University of Zielona Gora brought satisfactory data proving that students see problems that people with disabilities, their collegemates, face and, in addition, accept their disabled mates (only one respondent claimed that disabled people should not study).

Disabled peoples are identified mainly through problems communicating (45,7%), moving around (15,8%). Nearly all respondents stated that they met disabled persons. Disabled people's activities in class were confirmed too. Pointing out at disabled people's very high activity, however, only a little over one half of the respondents accepts cooperation with the disabled in class. Almost every fourth of the respondents openly does not want to engage themselves in cooperation with such people in class, whereas 13,9% of the participants in the survey did not take any attitude towards this question. A little more than one half are always willing to help. The remaining percentage choose various reasons for refusal, e.g. the person's independence, being in a hurry or a situation when assistance can be offered by someone else.

The answers, as obtained, to problem questions posed in the survey are considered by the author as a positive influence of collegemates, the school, upon disabled people starting their career and endeavours aiming at a disabled person's taking up a job.

Summarizing, it is fair to state then that health problems that both children at the earliest ages and adults encounter, disability in one's environment, these provide for acceptance of disabled people. Thanks to this, problems are more easily detected, on a day-to-day basis,

within the milieu of the studying youth, so that assistance is offered, whenever possible to those who need support.

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