



School environment in the Asperger Syndrome students narration, research conclusions

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The article addresses the subject of social functioning of a student diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome in the environment of a mass education school, in his subjective opinion. Methodologically speaking it is based on qualitative studies and the aim of the research was to reach subjective significance given by the students with Asperger Syndrome to this institution and understanding the role it plays for them.

KEY WORDS: Asperger Syndrome, mass education of disabled students, narration of students with Asperger Syndrome

Transformations of the contemporary world, ever-present civilisation progress, the surrounding reality changing at a breathtaking pace and the change taking place in front of our eyes, for instance with regard to approach to disabilities, has become the basis for investigating the thoughts and feelings of the disabled. The studies covered the students diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome, and the material for research was their own narration devoted to functioning in the environment most crucial for them – peer environment of

the mainstream school. The problem of constantly growing epidemiology of Autism Spectrum Disorders is not without considerable significance here. Despite the growing number of students with Asperger Syndrome in the mainstream schools, it is still difficult to detect the source which would provide a complete picture of the condition and the model of procedure. Asperger Syndrome is a fairly new nosologic condition included in the list of International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems, ICD-10¹ in the 1990s, therefore the literature on the subject is still scarce. What makes the matters even more difficult, we lack diagnostics criteria, in result of which some publications considers Asperger Syndrome a form of autism. Also contemporary classification tendencies seem to be seeking to liquidate both autism and Asperger Syndrome as separate diseases in order to create one single disease entity: ASD – Autistic Spectrum Disorder (Autystyczne Spektrum Zaburzeń)². It entails the risk of repeating in Poland the situation which took place in the 1980s. Then in the education process both students with high-functioning autism, and students with Asperger Syndrome were mainly educated as part of special education. The changes described above, taking place also in the organisation of education for the disabled people in Poland covered also the researched group of students with the diagnosed Asperger Syndrome, within the cognitive parameters standards, able to function in the world around them as its fully legitimate participants. It is difficult to find in the theme publications any answers to the questions concerning functioning of the people with Asperger Syndrome as seen from their perspective, since the explanations are mostly supplied by diagnostic criteria or from the perspective of standards, or criteria for the functioning of the disabled people.³ The perspec-

¹ *Klasyfikacja zaburzeń psychicznych i zaburzeń zachowania ICD 10, Badawcze kryteria diagnostyczne*, Wyd. Vesalius, Kraków – Warszawa 1998.

² *Klasyfikacja Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fifth edition DSM-5*, American Psychiatric Association, American Psychiatric Association, 2013

³ Galkowski T., *Dziecko autystyczne w środowisku rodzinnym i szkolnym*, WSiP, Warszawa 1997; Gralińska M., *Jak dokonać wyboru właściwej drogi edukacyjnej dziecka*

tive of the parties concerned is rarely a subject of studies in the special education. Also the search for some educational or integration solutions lacks such perspective. Thus the opinions of the very beneficiaries of those transformations and systemic adaptations was quite intriguing. If these action correspond to their needs in their subjective opinion? Clinical experience and initial analysis of literature revealed that the students under the studies act as a quite conscious subject with well-defined plans and environmental activity. Questions asked during the studies were connected with perception of one of the most significant environment for children, namely the school they attend. Therefore the meaning given to school and events taking place at school by students with Asperger Syndrome became the subject of the studies. The research process was supposed to make us understand the sense and essence given to such experience by us – the observers – the way those students interpret it, and not the way we think they do.

The subject of the research was the school environment and the relationship between it and a student with Asperger Syndrome, the way the student perceives the school through this relation and the final significance given to the school environment by the student with Asperger Syndrome. In the conducted research it was quite interesting to reach the senses and meanings given by students with Asperger Syndrome to their functioning at school as the socialising area of multilayer relations, reconstructing and reaching the subjective meanings given to this institution by the students with Asperger Syndrome and understanding what school is form them.

niepełnosprawnego?, [in:] Twardowski A. (ed), *Wspomaganie rozwoju dzieci ze złożonymi zespołami zaburzeń*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Polskiego Towarzystwa Psychologicznego, Poznań 2005; Jagielska G, *Dziecko z autyzmem i Zespołem Aspergera w szkole i przedszkolu*, Wydawnictwo Ośrodka Rozwoju Edukacji, Warszawa 2010; Jaklewicz H. ed., *Edukacja osób autystycznych w praktyce i badaniach naukowych*, SPOA, Gdańsk 1997, materiały konferencyjne; Komender J., Jagielska G., Bryńska A., *Autyzm i Zespół Aspergera*, PZWL, Warszawa 2009; Pisula E., *Jak matki postrzegają swoje dzieci z autyzmem – jakościowa analiza wypowiedzi matek*, [in:] Pisula E., Mazur A., *Rodzina z dzieckiem z niepełnosprawnością*, Harmonia, Gdańsk 2007.

Searching for the way to show the perspective of respondents, qualitative research turned out to be the best perspective. Qualitative methodology seemed the most appropriate research form for subjective feelings connected with functioning within social interactions of the people with disability like Asperger Syndrome. Research carried out according to a qualitative method, in a natural environment create a holistic picture of the experience shared by the boys. The phenomenon under research is difficult to explore applying the objective method, since the aim of the research process was mainly to deepen the significance and emphasizing an individual character of every respondent, and not merely learning the reality in an objective sense. The criteria for choosing the research sample enumerated in the research were: clinical diagnosis of the Asperger Syndrome, category student, critical period of development which is growing up and maturing (this category is particularly important because of the type of the research dealing with social interactions established by people with Asperger Syndrome, which become predominant in a teenage group), possibility of communication and involvement in the narration.

The research was carried out between December 2011 and July 2012 in an office in Autism Advice Centre at Mental Health Outpatient Clinic for Children and Adolescents in Voivodeship Psychiatric Health Centre in Olsztyn. The procedure lasted from sixty to ninety minutes. The interviews were recorded with the use of a recorder, thanks to which repeated returning to the recording and going through the recorded material was possible. In order to ensure some comfort during the research, each student was informed about the confidential character of personal data of the participants. The group consisted of eleven boys with diagnosed Asperger Syndrome aged between 13 and 18, namely: four thirteen-year-olds, four fifteen-year-olds, one seventeen-year-old and two eighteen-year-olds. The research group was homogenous in terms of sex. Selection of age between 13 and 18 was crucial due to critical phase of development of the respondents. The group was homogeneous in terms of sex. The students under the research realised their compul-

sory education on the basis of the evaluation for special education, attending 11 mass education schools in Warmia-Mazuria Voivodeship. In the course of the studies the subject of the analysis was the issue of how the students with Asperger Syndrome experience their functioning in school environment and what meaning do they apply to it? In the research they told about their experience and the accompanying emotions and feelings. The respondents, even those – as indicated in their answers – clearly alienated from the school society of their peers, like school and like spending time in it, also willing to spend their free time within its premises taking part in extra-curricular activities, observing their mates at play, taking advantage of the quiet comfort and book collections of the school reading. Also the boys who have finished their school education, seem to be returning to the school vicinity, to pay a visit. The analysis of the respondents' replies indicates that their experience in establishing relations both with their peers, and their teachers, as well as the course of such relations, determine their opinion of school to a considerable extent. Difficulties in establishing relationships with other people by the students with Asperger Syndrome can be recognised in their replies indicating isolation of such students at school. Surprisingly enough, subjective reception of such difficulties determine the perception of the school environment by such student only to a small extent. Of course, the relation between the quality of interpersonal relationships experienced by the surveyed students and their approach to school as such is quite noticeable, yet, even those respondents with extremely negative experience of peer contact, explicitly claim that school is an important place for them. Experiencing "being different" in the out-of-school environment may be transferred in the form of fear of "the other" mass school environment, where such "otherness" is even more noticeable. The research conducted failed to prove it. The surveyed students with Asperger Syndrome did not signal in their replies that leaving the protective family environment and functioning in the school environment would be problematic for them. Answering the question about the significance given to the mainstream (mass) school environment by

people with the diagnosed Asperger Syndrome we should indicate that the respondents, despite functioning on the periphery of the peer group declare that they like school, like being in it and like spending time at school, both while learning, and in their free time. The analysis of the interview states that, just like in case of all students, school institution is given a prominent place in the life of a student with Asperger Syndrome. When asked to talk about their lives, the surveyed students devoted a considerable part of their remark to school or even started their statement with a tale of school. The research has shown that for a student with Asperger syndrome and problems connected with establishing a relationship, school is nevertheless a place of establishing contacts. During the interview the respondents talk about distress experienced at school, derision, violence from the peers, nonetheless they seem to emphasize that they feel "cool" at school and know that they can seek help from teachers. Most importantly, the narration of the respondents suggests that they start to create defensive mechanisms, learn to adapt to certain situations, and thus they socialize. The content of the narration indicates that they perceive school as fulfilling its educational, and also partly integration and social function. Another interesting issue that appeared was the way the surveyed students with the diagnosed Asperger Syndrome experience their functioning in school environment and what meaning do they assign to this environment? Special talents and interests typical of Asperger Syndrome translate into the results at school. For students with Asperger Syndrome school acts as not only the sphere of functioning with their peers, but also creates the possibility of confirming their own competences. Many surveyed people emphasize their significant achievements in terms of science. Their encyclopaedic knowledge enables them to improve their own self-esteem and most importantly – impress a teacher. Feeling no need for competition is characteristic of functioning of people with Asperger Syndrome.⁴ Therefore

⁴ Komender J., Jagielska G., Bryńska A., *Autyzm i Zespół Aspergera*, PZWL, Warszawa 2009.

their achievements against the rest of the population are not so meaningful in the subjective assessment of the respondents. Whereas a praise addressed directly at them has significant meaning. A positive assessment aspect is mainly visible with regard to educational role of the school. The respondents become clearly frustrated when talking about the PE lessons. These are the classes which require physical skills and teamwork, whereas a student with Asperger Syndrome struggles not only with motor dysfunctions, but has a huge problem with team games and understanding the their rules. The interview clearly indicate a negative assessment with regard to failures experienced during PE classes. These failures influence the way in which such student is treated by his peers. Negative assessment is characteristic of the first years of education. The respondents explicitly emphasize that it was extremely difficult for them in the beginning, being taken advantage of by their mates e. g. as a person to copy their homework from or to laugh at. The surveyed students declared that functioning "on the margin of school social life" is not a big problem for them and does not influence their assessment of school, which they like attending, and even a shallow character of the relationship with peers is valued by them higher than total lack of it.

Investigating the issue of how the surveyed students with Asperger Syndrome interpret their social relationships at school showed that relationships with peers do not determine the meaning assigned to school environment by the respondents. It is conditioned by the specific functioning of the student with Asperger Syndrome. Such specificity makes the conclusions drawn while investigating the picture of school in the narration of a student with Asperger Syndrome completely different from those drawn from the research on peer relationships among non-disabled students. In the case of the latter aged 13–18, peer relationships play a significant part not only in a social development of a young man, but also influence the assessment of school. It does not mean, however, that relationships with peers are insignificant for students with Asperger Syndrome. The respondents tend to characterise the category of

friendship differently declaring that there is nobody they would call a friend. In fact, they declare to feel no particular need to establish such relationship. They do not mind sitting alone during breaks or passively observing their peers at play. In the descriptions of social relationships formulated by the surveyed students with Asperger Syndrome within the school premises, we can clearly notice their attempt at explaining and somehow justifying their peers approach to them. Due to the difficulties in establishing contacts with peers, a student with Asperger Syndrome naturally turns to people who, in their opinion, pose no threat, namely to teachers and pedagogues. The students gave positive assessment to teachers conducting classes in subjects related to selective interests of particular respondents and those intervening in situations threatening the student. In their narrations students with Asperger Syndrome describe their functioning in the school environment in an inconclusive way with a visible inner contradiction – they clearly emphasize how much distress they experienced at school from their peers. However it does not entail the domination of negative feelings in their subjective approach to school environment. From the respondents' remarks it follows that school environment and social relationships within its premises are significantly predominant over the family environment. The analysis of the interview in terms of aspirations and expectations of student with Asperger Syndrome with regard to school showed that the students with Asperger Syndrome are close to the concept of "full integration", with their effective participation in educational activities carried out in schools of mass education. What is more, their subjective assessment of school as an institution and their experience gained through earlier stages of education make them plan to continue such education in the longer perspective. Awareness of their own limitations is no obstacle for the respondents in formulating long-term plans. The combination of the aspirations of the surveyed students with Asperger Syndrome with their individual dysfunctions and talents indicated that they accurately defined their own predispositions. The analysis and conclusions drawn from the research show that the question about the

aspirations of the students with Asperger Syndrome one should reply that they boil down to normal peaceful living and that their plan does not assume vegetation and passive submission to the course of events, but an active conscious participation and fully fledged functioning in the society. Thus the assumptions of a significant theoretical conception of special education, namely standardisation of the environment with a basic aim in transformation of the environment so as to make a normal life possible are fully confirmed. This kind of purposeful legislative action with regard to integration will contribute to full participation of students with disabilities covered by Autistic Spectrum Disorders in the mass education system. Thus current legislative trends aiming at involving the legislators in creating legal regulations providing solutions for integrating disabled people, including students with Asperger Syndrome, within the mass education system are all the more important. Such process was caused by, e. g. ratification by the Polish government in 2012 *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (2006), aiming at the protection and ensuring full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by persons with disabilities on an equal basis with all other citizens. Provision of article 24 of the Convention guarantees the persons with disabilities the right to education without discrimination on the basis of equal opportunity, is reflected in the amendment to the Polish provisions on education system and social security. Currently we can state that the binding legal regulations in Poland provide conditions for implementation of the rights of the disabled persons to education. As the studies showed – it is not particular provisions on the access to education that entail problems, but lack of more precise executive provisions which would provide for their implementation.⁵

Slow character of changes taking place in the Polish mass education schools, resistance of the teaching staff to the necessity to im-

⁵ Błaszczak A., Kurowski K., Mazurczak A. i in. (ed), *Realizacja przez Polskę zobowiązań wynikających z Konwencji o prawach osób niepełnosprawnych – sprawozdanie Rzecznika Praw Obywatelskich*, Warszawa 2015.

prove their qualifications, slowness in adjusting teacher training programme to a new situation, duration of the process of changes in the approach of non-disabled members of the society, the cost of implementing changes – all this cannot become an excuse for limiting or cancelling the opportunity of students with Asperger Syndrome to fulfil their humanity.

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