

## Suffering or Joy in the Process of Rehabilitating People with Hearing Impairment?

*All human suffering,  
all pain, all infirmity  
contains within itself a promise of salvation,  
a promise of joy*

John Paul II, *Memory and Identity*

**Key words:** deaf education, rehabilitation, quality of life of deaf people

### Abstract

Since the establishment of deaf education as a subdiscipline of special pedagogy people have asked many questions: Is deafness a punishment? Does a deaf person feel pain caused by hearing damage? In order to answer these questions, the issue of suffering vs. joy was presented. The problem was referred to in the history of deaf education and in the contemporary discourse in education, learning and rehabilitation of deaf people (perceived through individual experiences of the life quality). Presentation of the profiles of people with hearing disability is shows their way of life. The way which is perceived through life achievements, successes or physical and moral or spiritual pain.

### Introduction

Reflections on the experience of suffering or lack of thereof presented in the context of deaf education require an explanation of the term “suffering”.

The most common meaning of “suffering”, both in everyday language and in literary studies, is misfortune, sadness, punishment, curse, evil. The dictionary of the Polish language (*Słownik języka polskiego*, 1983, p. 302) defines the term “suffering” as “pain, torment, anguish, distress”. “To suffer” means “to experience, feel, bear physical or mental pain” (therein). Therefore, suffering is an integral part of human life, regardless of one’s age, sex, race, religion, social class or nationality. In the course of their lives, people experience distress or ailments such as a toothache or body burns. They also suffer from love, bereavement or from having their feelings hurt. Let the words of John Paul II

be the conclusion to the language settlements: suffering is always a great test not only of physical strength but also spiritual strength (1994, p. 39).

Suffering comprises joy and hope, good and evil. It is difficult to write about suffering because every human being perceives suffering in a subjective way, just as we subjectively assess our health or the feelings of happiness or sadness. Therefore, nobody can definitively answer the questions: What is suffering? What is joy? How do we experience those feelings? How do we suffer from something or enjoy something? What is the meaning of suffering? Is deafness a punishment? Is the experience of suffering a call for help? These and other questions were and still are considered by representatives of various scientific disciplines. Questions can be multiplied, responded to, discussed, but according to priest Michał Heller “the beauty of the scientific adventure is that it will never run out of further question marks” ([www.upjp2.edu.pl](http://www.upjp2.edu.pl)).

So what questions appear in the theory and practice of the rehabilitation of hearing-impaired people? Since the establishment of deaf education as a subdiscipline of special pedagogy people have asked many questions: Is deafness a punishment? Does a deaf person feel pain caused by hearing damage? In order to answer these questions, the issue of suffering vs. joy was presented. This problem was referred to in the history of deaf education and in the contemporary discourse in education, learning and rehabilitation of deaf people (perceived through individual experiences of life quality).

## The Problem of Suffering in the Context of History and the Contemporary Assumptions of Deaf Education

According to Kowalik, the situation of disabled people in the ancient and medieval times as well as the social attitude towards this social group in those times were “unfavourable” (2008, p. 66). Under the influence of the views of St. Augustine, hearing impaired people were perceived as dangerous heretics possessed by the devil (Kirejczyk, 1967, p. 43). It is hard to state that people with hearing defects faced physical or spiritual suffering because of their deafness or physical pain caused by, for example, cutting the tongue. However, unethical treatment of these people, in the perspective of the deaf education history, should be perceived as an exemplification of discriminatory attitudes and as the isolation coming from the non-disabled part of the society (Szczepankowski, 1999, p. 344).

All actions aiming at the vision of contemporary assumptions of deaf education cannot reflect “the history of rehabilitation treated as the history of overcoming human suffering and social fears related to it” (Kowalik, 2008, p. 75). The above brief reference to the history of rehabilitation of disabled people should make us aware of “the historical perspective which makes understanding of the revolutionary changes easy for a special educator”. These changes can be observed in the contemporary education and care for hearing impaired children as well as in the perception of “the dynamic social processes in the more and more emancipated society of deaf people” (Podgórska-Jachnik, 2008, p. 164).

Since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Hulek (1980) has been the symbol of the slogan in the development of special education: “problems of non-disabled and disabled persons are common”. This catchphrase has been the main thesis of the rehabilitating actions towards disabled persons, consistent with the following assumptions:

- Disability is only one of many other characteristics that influence human development. More important than the type of disability are its scope and level of limitation as well as the living conditions and the quality of rehabilitation actions;
- Developmental possibilities of both disabled and non-disabled persons depend on abilities, talents and living conditions;
- Disability has no significant influence on personality traits.

According to Dykcik (2010), theoretical assumptions of A. Hulek laid a foundation for the non-traditional, multidimensional approach to the message of special education: there are more common spheres between the disabled and non-disabled persons than spheres that are different. In the opinion of Giryński (2009, p. 337), multi-contextuality in the approach towards a person and the phenomena of disability proves:

- Perception of developmental and creative resources;
- Acting against discrimination and social marginalization, which means the right for participation in the life of the society and taking certain roles.

According to the same author (coherent with the personalistic conception), people perceive rehabilitation of people with various types and levels of disability in categories of subjectivity, autonomy, identity, self-realization, standardization, responsibility, integration, discrimination and exclusion in the context of minority groups.

C. Kosakowski (2005) pays attention to two stages of defining the aims of special education in the historical perspective. Initially, attention was directed to human disorders and perceiving persons through their disorders, limited abilities and their inferiority. In the second stage, we emphasize the mutual aims of education and special education, and the superior aim for disabled and non-disabled persons. The aim of rehabilitation is always the same: “striving for maximal physical, mental and social recovery, preparation for – as far as possible – a normal life, joining the society” (Hulek, 1980, p. 468).

Contemporary deaf education concentrates on what is not disordered, what can cause suffering. Instead, it poses questions: how to improve the quality of life of people with hearing impairments, so they would not experience the suffering that results from not understanding their disability? Or take difficulties in verbal communication as suffering? How to support parents in overcoming the difficulties in experiencing the disability of their hearing impaired children? How to help parents to minimize their own suffering and their child’s suffering?

Evolution of education and rehabilitation of disabled persons caused that deaf education, whose subject of the scientific studies is “an estimation of the correlation between various elements of the society, which have an influence on the hearing impaired people” (Eckert, 1997, p. 149), is oriented on subjectivity, resources and participation. Therefore, the subject of the research is a person with the hearing impairment who is set in various dimensions of the living space.

## The Quality of Rehabilitation Actions and Life Experience in the Perception of Deaf People

Biographical approach to disability in the cognitive process of varied and specific conditions of the human existence takes into account individual descriptions of the quality of life “in the context of the objective living conditions, its cultural and material level as well as in subjective reactions to one’s own life experiences, related to the diversification of the spheres of life” (Palak, 2006, p. 9).

Bartnikowska (2010, p. 188), through biographical research carried out among parents of deaf children, gathered (during the interviews) scientific data inevitable for the description and reconstruction of events, perception of the family and social life of this group, as well as “quoted opinions aimed

at the exemplification of thinking and interpretation of events". The same author states that in case of biographical research we can benefit from the available resources, for example, diaries, documents, films. In this paper, I used expressions of people with impaired hearing from several text sources, that is, interviews and discussions published in magazines: a magazine for deaf people titled "The World of Silence", Krakow Semester Magazine for the Hearing Impaired Students – "KSSN" and in a study edited by Surma (2003) *Niepokonani mimo wszystko* – "Still unbeaten". Therefore, the presentation of the profiles of people with hearing disability is an example of their way of living.

Magdalena B. does not hear from birth. Her hearing loss in the right ear is 100 dB and 75 dB in the left one. She is a physical education student and a double World Championship gold medallist in Izmir, Turkey (in the triple jump and long jump). When asked what she felt standing on the podium, she said: "Happiness. So great that I cannot describe it. I was happy, puffed up with pride (...) No one who doesn't train can imagine the cost you pay for getting on the podium. I paid for the medals with great effort, pain and sometimes tears. (Bachmatiuk, 2008, p. 15). Magda's statement is a reflection of the interview: "I jump for joy", which was derived from a biographical description of her way of life. On the other hand, she admits that her life has not been always happy. Magda attended public schools, grew up among hearing parents, peers, and now she has a coach with whom she communicates in the sign language. From a time perspective, she believes that it was hard to find one's feet in the world of non-deaf people: "children couldn't communicate with me. Although with age I accepted my hearing impairment and coped with the world of non-deaf people" (therein, p. 16). Magda assesses her way of life as a "constant improvement" (therein).

Ania S. does not hear from birth. She made a decision to undergo an ear implant surgery. Like Magda, she attended public schools. At high school she met with deaf people, "she put on the hearing aid, started using sign language, she felt understood and accepted in this background" (Suberlak, 2010, p. 36). She began losing hearing and made the difficult decision to undergo an implant surgery. "I was scared of it, especially the pain, and I had thousands of other fears related to the surgery". On the contrary to her family, she founded the surgery very positive. "My family and my friends expected that I would return bald, unhappy and I would lay in bed for days. None of these things. I was happy, the loss of hair was unnoticeable (...). Headaches and remembering not

to make the ear wet were the negatives (...) I'm certain about one thing: I did not suffer as I had expected. The dark side was the sole surgery – a little bit painful, very stressful (...) Sometimes it was very hard to understand all that sounds around me – it caused anger and disappointment. I was ready to give up but fighting and endurance were even more important” (therein, p. 37). We often make important decisions in life and according to Ania, we are the only people who take responsibility for them. Parents and hearing impaired children should thoroughly consider living with the cochlea implant, but as Ania said: “Make the decision yourself and be happy with the sense of hearing or without it” (therein).

The book *Niepokonani mimo wszystko* – “Still unbeaten” (Surma, 2003) is a presentation of the difficult way of living of wards at the Diagnosis and Rehabilitation Centre for Children and Young People with Hearing Impairment in Szczecin. Diehl (2003, p. 13) – the long standing chairman of the Board of the Polish Association of the Deaf confirms that the described experiences and achievements of people who overcame the frontiers of hearing “needs to be widely popularized”. Similarly, Ania K. admits that “people with disabilities have a huge barrier to overcome – their background. But as long as we don't live in hiding, the problem of people with disabilities doesn't exist” (Surma, 2003, p. 123).

Around 30% of the wards at the Szczecin Centre have attended a special school. The stay of a deaf student in a boarding special school often gives him a sense of belonging to a group of the deaf. On the other hand, it can also be a trigger for anxiety behaviours. Based on the conclusions of the study conducted by Korzon (2008, p. 33) we can state that the inability to escape from living in a board and excessive dependence on others can cause “suffering resulting from general fear”, whose symptoms are anger, aggression, fear, awaiting unpleasant experience.

These negative symptoms are common in interactions between deaf and non-deaf persons. Długołęcka (2008, p. 12) discusses several painful problems in relations with non-deaf people and poses the following questions: “Don non-deaf people hurt us? Are they unkind to us? Do they despise us because we do not hear and do not talk like them? The author mentions several situations, “disgraceful cases” which exemplify teasing, injustice sustained by hearing impaired persons from non-deaf persons. It results from, among others, the lack of knowledge about the nature of the issue of deafness, its consequences, the specifics of the sign language. “An average person knows very little about

us (deaf people), but is very curious what it is like not to hear (...). He or she would willingly know a deaf person, because she might teach him something (...), but does not know how to behave, lose voice (...) withdraw, is afraid. We behave similarly in these difficult situations. Otherness and novelty awake anxiety” (Długołęcka, 2008, p. 12).

Based on the above exemplary quotes we can state that deafness “is not a characteristic, but an inability resulting from interactions between limitations and expectations of an individual”. Therefore, it is a result of social and economic myths and barriers which reflect the way we perceive otherness (Piotrowicz, 2009, p. 311).

The assessment of the quality of life made by hearing impaired persons is often associated with the experience of numerous difficulties, mostly related to communication barriers. Based on one’s own research, backed up by clinical observations in the subject literature, Kobosko (2010, p. 113) states that perceiving young people with hearing impairment as disabled persons is experiencing “myself as a linguistic and cultural minority” – in relation to the linguistic, not the cultural dimension. Therefore, only 3% of non-deaf persons declare relationships with their deaf peers. While 27% of deaf students and students with hearing difficulties want to have such a relationship (therein).

Subjectivity of the child in the rehabilitation process of disabled people is the most important, but parents and therapists are not forgotten. All of them contribute to the quality of family life in which deaf children grow up; they are responsible for the failures and successes. Surma (2003, p. 156) emphasizes that people with hearing impairment, named “still unbeaten”, “are four times more reconciled with their lives than their non-disabled parents”.

The quoted statements confirm that the perception of life quality among hearing impaired persons is the same as among non-deaf persons and results from the same sensations, e.g. sorrow, pain, grief and joy, satisfaction, pleasure resulting from one’s own existence. All the above sensations give the aim and meaning to life in the context of one’s needs and abilities (Augustyniak-Nawrot 2001, p. 18). It confirms Hulek’s thesis about common problems of disabled and non-disabled persons.

## Conclusions

Transformation of firm historical and cultural social attitudes towards disabled persons is a long-term process. It requires recognition and celeb-



ration of the thesis of inclusive pedagogy: diversity is normality (por. Lechta, 2010; Mores, 2010) and respecting the autonomy of others. Therefore, experiencing pain by hearing impaired people results most often from socio-cultural barriers observed in the interactions between deaf and non-deaf people. Sometimes experiencing pain by deaf persons is “calling for help”, but we – non-deaf persons – do not hear, we do not want to hear it or we cannot help.

The agreement beyond boundaries, described by Długołęcka (2008), Benedict and Sass-Lehrer (2007) requires mutual cooperation, partnership and participation of both parties: deaf and non-deaf persons. In order to make the form and course of this cooperation/mutual relation positive, it must rely on the readiness and openness of both parties to meet and understand each other (Gunia, 2009). Therefore, we should constantly continue actions of shaping “the disability awareness” among non-deaf persons. We should do this in order to perceive hearing impaired person not only through suffering, pain, but also through the creation of otherness which results in success, joy on the one hand and failure, sadness on the other. Experiences which are so very natural for every human being in every stage of life.

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