

HOW REHABILITATION CENTERS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH WITH HEARING IMPAIRMENT CAN BENEFIT FROM THE PROJECT CHANCE

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There have been efforts to study therapeutic methods applied in hearing impairment rehabilitation centers. This turned out to be a very difficult and challenging task requiring great organization, in-depth knowledge of the issue and content-related preparation.

Damian Dudała, our student of deaf education and the creator of this project, decided to undertake such an effort. For the past few years he has been deeply engaged in writing and carrying out several projects concerning people with disabilities. Moreover, he has participated in many workshops and training courses in Poland and abroad in order to acquire the necessary theoretical and practical background on the rights of and choices facing young people with disabilities. Given his own disability (Damian has been hearing-impaired since birth), he concentrated mainly on activities involving the deaf and people with hearing impairment.

At the moment there are 26 functioning rehabilitation centers established by the Polish Association of the Deaf. The main goal of the earlier centers, which were established in 1960s, was to prepare children with hearing impairment to attend classes in primary school. For many years, the extent of a child's disability often determined the choice of his or her school. It was assumed that children attending special schools would be assured proper assistance from specialists. At the same time, only a very limited number of children with disabilities who decided to attend a regular school had the opportunity to participate in preparatory classes that would allow them to enter regular classrooms.

Partly due to the recent interest in mainstreaming – the integration of disabled children into regular classroom settings – more and more children started attending regular, not special, schools. The rehabilitation centers also began to broaden their activities. Specialists in deaf education and psychologists began to understand the growing necessity of working with youth who – despite their disability – have better opportunities to continue their education now. Nevertheless, enhanced possibilities often bring other problems. As for individual abilities, there is also a growing need to improve the youth's language, communication and cultural capabilities. There are many complaints from deaf youth about problems with functioning properly in soci-

ety. In addition to feeling isolated, they have serious problems accepting their own disability. Questions such as “who am I?” are particularly difficult to answer for people with hearing impairment because they often have trouble verbalizing their feelings. Deaf youth are frequently perceived as less effective than their real potential abilities imply. For that reason they need extra assurance that they understand the substance of any task prior to undertaking it. Furthermore, the difficulties expressing opinions or following discussions that deaf youth face are often incorrectly interpreted by others as an indication of low intellectual capabilities.

That is why psychological classes are so important in improving social skills. The main goal of the classes is to teach young people how to be assertive, to cope with a group or new environment, and to overcome obstacles in job searches.

The instability of the Polish health-care system and its reform compounded problems for many rehabilitation centers, which had to reduce the number of their employees. This in turn limited their activities and narrowed course offerings. Of late, the situation in most of the centers has become more stable, and in some cases, the crisis even mobilized the centers to undertake new activities.

I hope that through direct contact with a number of rehabilitation centers, Damian – with some help from Wrocław's Polish Association of the Deaf – will contribute to the dissemination of best practices. This will also facilitate the exchange of experiences between specialists and perhaps lead to further and deeper engagement in further activities. I am convinced that the material he has collected will constitute an invaluable contribution to research in the field.

Given his direct contact with youth and a positive attitude, Damian has the opportunity to influence and mobilize young people into taking action. Moreover, he will show them how to deepen their knowledge and raise funds for interesting projects. He is also an excellent example of a person with disability who can function in society and achieve success.

In addition, Project Chance publicizes and promotes the interests of the deaf community. Information about its research activities is published in the media and disseminated in conferences in order to bring the majority society in closer touch with the problems of people with hearing impairments.