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Deaf and Hard of Hearing In Poland: Part 2

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In the last article, Damian Dudala shared his thoughts on life for hard of hearing and deaf people in Poland, and his experience with disability rights as a hard of hearing worker.

Our interview continues here, exploring the situation in Poland and Damian's path to his current commitments.

Karina: How do hard of hearing (HoH) and Deaf people get education at schools in Poland?

Damian: The Polish education system has several types of pre-university schools, from 3-year specialized secondary school to 2- or 3-year vocational schools to 3-year complementary technical secondary school. In special education schools, teachers know Polish Sign Language and only a few teachers know Natural Sign Language of Deaf.

Unfortunately there isn't a strong link between secondary and higher education, which is why my organisation held a national conference on this topic.

Collaboration between schools and Universities in Poland is insufficient because we have two enducation departments with two separate budgets. Teachers from schools for the deaf very often do not link with higher institutions because they do not have such a responsibility.

This has a negative effect on deaf people because eduation for them very often ends at high-school level. This is complicated by widely believed stereotypes about deaf people which imply that higher education is "unnecessary" for deaf people in Poland. But, deaf people obviously want the option to continue their study further, so this is a problem.

The situation is slightly better for HoH people, particularly for those who come to college from mainstream schools. These schools are concerned about continuation of education by their students and regularly discuss the benefits of higher education and support.

The second reason for lack of University-school link, in my opinion, is that majority of schools for deaf people are outside of the city (the result of another stereotype which dictates that "special schools" shouldn't be within the city limits). This is changing as more leaders of university disability programs seek to promote the link between schools and universities.

Finally there's the issue of awareness. Deaf and HoH people often don't know what support options they have from Universities. But this situation is gradually changing.

As for higher education, there are both state and private institutions of higher education available in Poland. Study programs can take the form of daily (the most common), evening, or external studies and "correspondence" courses.

Sometimes a university may offer sign language interpreters, note-takers, materials prepared by teachers before lectures, FM systems, loop-systems, multimedia presentations, and sign language courses for students who want to work with deaf/HoH. Institutions may also provide Polish language courses for deaf and hard of hearing people, as well as psychological support, career office, volunteers groups.

Karina: What were your key initiatives on deaf/HoH issues in Poland?

About the Author

Karina Chupina is a freelance international trainer, consultant, and writer from St. Petersburg, Russia. Karina became interested in international matters and writing during the year she spent at an American high school in Tecumseh, MI, while participating in a student exchange program. She went on to earn an M.A. in International Journalism (St. Petersburg) and an Executive MA in International and European Relations & Management (Amsterdam).



Karina has authored articles on themes of disability, minority participation, mass media, human rights education, culture and social inclusion. She is the only trainer with a disability in the international Trainers' Pool of the Council of Europe Youth Sector (www.coe.int/youth).

Karina is deeply involved with local disability youth organisation and IFHOHYP, the International Federation of Hard of Hearing Young People, and serves as its President. She has been project leader for several of such international projects and training programs, as "Integration through Arts and Education", "Disability and Sport", "How to Make a Campaign on Hearing Disability", "Building Communication for Hard of Hearing Youth: Breaking Down Barriers and Stereotypes", the Russian Deaf Art Exhibits and more.

Karina continues her postgraduate education in Political Science & Sociology (St. Petersburg and Berlin) and in her free time, enjoys carefree bicycling, theatre, and dancing.

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My "brainchildren" are IISCE disability projects, Project "Chance," and Human Rights in the Context of People with Disabilities (here, Damian smiles). All of them are bringing disability into the discourse of human rights with particular focus on higher education. You know that students with disabilities face many barriers in education. And indeed, for many people, those barriers are simply too high to be able to continue studies after high school!

So I've taken a three-pronged approach in my projects: I researched and documented barriers to education, then trained students and activists on how to overcome barriers, and finally, I used outreach to promote equal access to education as a basic human right.

Karina: Your project, which is called "Chance," sounds quite promising...

Damian: It ran from January 2005 to June 2006 and focused on collecting innovative methods or forms of activity used in therapy and rehabilitation for hard of hearing children and youth in Poland. From the collected data we compiled a compendium that now serves as an informational and educational guide with best practices in the rehabilitation of children and youth with hearing loss. It all started as a series of workshops called "Encounters with Human Rights" which introduced students and local activists to the history and theory of human rights in the context of disability.

Since then, the project expanded to include a large conference, People with Disabilities and Education. It was designed as a forum for sharing research on disability issues faced by educational institutions.

Karina: What issues are addressed?

Damian: The obstacles to learning for students with disabilities are multi-faceted: they can be logistical and architectural, but they also include lack of Sign-language interpreters or note-taking services. Of course, there can also be widespread lack of awareness on the part of instructors and university administrators. So at such a conference we tried to address teachers, psychologists, and other academics from all over Poland - those who are interested in alternative ways for youth with disabilities to access higher education, and also in existing 'best practices' of the universities.

Karina: And what happened then?

Damian: I have since expanded my project portfolio to organize activities that address disability more broadly. The first step was the training course "Human Rights in the Context of People with Disabilities." The training session brought students with disabilities and non-profit organizations activists from Italy, Turkey, Romania, Spain, Poland, France, and Luxembourg together to discuss their experiences, intolerance, harassment, violence, and discrimination.

Now I am working to pursue European Structural Funds and create a cross-border training network that will educate local disability advocates on how to raise disability awareness.

Karina: In the beginning of your work for deaf and hard of hearing advocacy, you went to study in the UK and Finland. Why did you go to study there?

Damian: Let's start with saying that many deaf and hard of hearing people in Europe turn out to be outsiders in social life because they find it impossible to communicate, study and work in a society that is not sensitive to their needs. This state of affairs compels my research on the barriers faced by students with disabilities in secondary education. I spent a semester at the Bradford College in the north of England, where I conducted research for my thesis, a comparative study of experiences of activists in the local Deaf community and its counterpart in Poland.

Karina: You know, I always ask this question to those who spent some time abroad: how did the stay in the UK change your self-awareness, your attitude and perception of hearing loss? How did you change yourself?

Damian: In the United Kingdom I realized that understanding of disability is not the same than in Poland, nor is the understanding of the deaf community. Furthermore, the majority of deaf people there do not live in a "deaf community." They have hearing neighbors, hearing colleagues at work and hearing family members; they live, as it is commonly said, in a

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"hearing world."

It is clear that in the UK deaf community, there is a growing awareness of Deaf culture. One of the main values of this culture is the positive view of deafness, deaf people, and their language - British Sign Language. They can use rights from Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) - 1995. There is anti-discrimination legislation.

What about myself in this context? I think that myself I did not change a lot. But I understood that Polish society is not ready to inclusion process yet; but I want to bring these changes to Poland.

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