



SPOŁECZEŃSTWO
EDUKACJA
JĘZYK

Tom 16/2022, ss. 55-64
ISSN 2353-1266
e-ISSN 2449-7983
DOI: 10.19251/sej/2022.16(5)
www.sej.mazowiecka.edu.pl

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IMAGE OF CHILDREN WITH ASPERGER'S SYNDROME IN OPINIONS OF TEACHERS

OBRAZ DZIECI Z ZESPOŁEM ASPERGERA W OPINIACH NAUCZYCIELI

Abstrakt

Niniejsze badanie dotyczyło wiedzy na temat zespołu Aspergera, a także dystansu wykazywanego przez nauczycieli względem uczniów z tą dysfunkcją. Zauważono stosunkowo niewielki dystans społeczny w stosunku do tych osób. Badani wyrazili gotowość do zaakceptowania dziecka z tym zaburzeniem jako członka rodziny, dawcy narządów, a także ucznia szkoły. Wyjaśnienia dotyczące relatywnie małego dystansu psychologicznego między nauczycielem a dzie-

Abstract

This study addressed the knowledge about Asperger syndrome and the distance revealed by teachers towards a pupil with this dysfunction. I found a relatively small social distance towards students with Asperger's syndrome. The surveyed individuals expressed their willingness to approve such a child as a family member, organ donor and a student of a mass school. Explanations for the relatively small psychological distance between a teacher and a child

kiem z zespołem Aspergera opierają się na jego charakterystykach. Takie dziecko jest oceniane jako mające problemy, samotne i wycofane, nieprzystosowane, ale nie agresywne, nie stwarzające zagrożenia. Jest natomiast postrzegane jako podwójnie słabe, z jednej strony jako dziecko, zaś z drugiej jako osoba z niepełnosprawnością. Jednocześnie dzieci z zespołem Aspergera często są spotykane w szkołach.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE

dystans społeczny, sygnatyzm, zespół Aspergera, nauczyciel

with Asperger 's syndrome reveal information about its properties. Such a child is rated as having difficulties, lonely and withdrawn, unadjusted but not violent. It does not pose a threat. It is a weak two-fold, as a child and as a person with disabilities. It is known, tamed, as Asperger syndrome students are often encountered at schools.

KEYWORDS

social distance, stigma, Asperger's syndrome, teacher

1. Introduction

Most students with special educational needs take up education at mass schools¹.

It becomes essential to learn the teacher's opinions on this group since the attitude of a child towards the school, studies, and classmates depend on the teachers' demeanour. This study addressed the knowledge about Asperger syndrome and the distance revealed by teachers towards a pupil with this dysfunction.

The study of the attitudes of Poles towards mentally ill people suggests a "somewhat ambiguous picture of the relationship with the group. Although most respondents declare a positive attitude towards the said group, the assessment of the interviewees' environment is much more critical. At the same time, compared to the nineties, we are experiencing a decline in sympathy both in the attitudes of the respondents themselves and their environment ". In the same report reads: "Despite the dominant and affirmed belief that mental illness is treatable, those treated psychiatrically are still excluded from many social roles. For sixteen years, respondents are most opposed to the idea that former patient hospitals of psychiatric hospitals should engage in childcare (teachers, childminder), medicine and administration. However, there is a sign of positive change, and the, current social distance indicators are among the lowest throughout the period covered by the survey. Other disturbing signals perceived by most respondents is the discrimination of mentally ill individuals in their right to work, respect for personal dignity, education and the protection of assets. The treatment of the mentally ill in Polish society as an embarrassment, as something to hide is also noteworthy. This attitude shows that in social awareness. Mental illness is strongly stigmatised. The fear of discrimination and exclusion from various roles - the potential consequences

¹ up to 14.7 out of 1000, or 1 in 68 children (1 in 42 boys and 1 in 189 girls) Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, CDC, 2016, Marcin Płatos (red.) National Autism Census, OSA, 2016, Educational Information System, 2014,

of stigmatisation - leads to their concealment, which adversely can delay appropriate treatment (Omyła-Rudzka, 2012, 327). So how do opinions on autism, first described in 1943 by Leo Kanner, a neurodevelopmental disorder characterised by a triad of behavioural properties including problems in social relationships, communication difficulties and rigid behaviours and interests present on this background? Autism is heterogeneous. It can differ in character and degree. All its variants can be found on a continuum, in which on one end are people who cannot speak, have limited social skills and narrow interests significantly limiting their chances of independent living (Rybakowski et al., 2014). On the other, are the people diagnosed with Asperger syndrome, who seem to be socially deficient, appreciate permanence, have narrowed interests, but can lead an independent life and succeeding in professional work. It is estimated that one person of a hundred is diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders. There are many myths surrounding autism. Christian Jarret presented their synthetic comparison. One of them is the view that every person with autism has some rare talents, that they a genius in their way. The media willingly utilise this theme, distorting the facts for gaining viewership. Only 0.05% of low-intelligence autistic individuals possess extraordinary abilities. Another myth is that vaccines cause autism. Another myth is the epidemic of autism, yet another indicates that autistic people are asocial and unfeeling, deeply incompetent, that there is miraculous medicine that can cure autism (Jennet et. al, 2003). But we are not concerned with myths and facts about autism but a socially constructed knowledge about it.

In 2015 the Public Opinion Research Center carried out a fascinating study in relation to the World Day of Autism Awareness. The survey dealt with notions of the scale of occurrence and knowledge about this disorder. "(298) a computer-assisted face-to-face (CAPI) survey was conducted from March 5 to March 11, 2015, with 1062 individuals, a representative sample of adult residents of Poland These studies found that although most subjects (85%) declare they heard of autism, but much less (62%) declare they have never encountered an autistic person (even through media, films, magazines, literature). The ability to recognise the most typical characteristics of autism is rare. Autism is most often associated with difficulties in establishing contact with other people, problems with communication and speech; less than half of the respondents listed these characteristics. Other features of autism were listed even less frequently. A rather typic trait of a child misbehaving in public -- was rather negatively judged (53%) and the few respondents (5%) allowed the thought that illness was behind it (Jarret, 2017, 327).

The said studies relate to the general concept of a person with autism. This study deals with views on the specific category of the autism spectrum people - children affected by Asperger syndrome, who appear to be a border category, between individuals with fully symptomatic autism and the rest of society (Heatherton et. al, 2010). They face social life difficulties, appreciate constancy, have narrowed interests, but can lead an independent life and succeeding in professional work. This study I devoted to their image in the eyes of teachers. The horizontal analytical perspective of the study was the

concepts of social distance and stigma prospective according to social psychology of stigma (Hall, 2001).

2. Methods and study group

The research tool was a questionnaire of own construction. The questions concerned:

- sources of knowledge about Asperger Syndrome,
- the concept of the essence of Asperger Syndrome,
- needs of children with Asperger Syndrome,
- having these children psychological attributes of interpersonal attractiveness,
- access of children with Asperger Syndrome to normalization attributes,
- tendency to reduce the distance to a child with Asperger Syndrome.

The study was conducted on a group of 200 women - teachers of primary education, aged 25 to 32 years with a higher bachelor's degree, city-dweller in 2015 -17 in Warsaw high schools.

3. Research results

The response to certain phenomena, individuals, states of things is complex. In social attitudes towards people with disabilities, there is an increase in distance - a contractual psychological distance (Larkowa, 1978). The official statements declare tolerance and permission for vulnerability, especially in case of children. However, actions prove the avoidance of contact. Given the above, both officially proclaimed views and unspoken beliefs were included in the surveys.

Sources of knowledge about a child with Asperger's syndrome

The majority of subjects (71.4%) reported that Asperger's syndrome is widespread and that they have met children with Asperger's syndrome in their course of work. The results indicate that children with dysfunctions are present in mass schools where teachers got to know them in the course of direct, daily, constant contact. This fact could have been a factor contributing towards objectivity of knowledge and individualisation of assessment of a child with Asperger syndrome. It should be noted that contact had a place at a mass school as a workplace. As such, they were formalised and compulsory, which in turn does not necessarily entail a reduction in the distance to such children. In brief, contacts with difference were enforced administratively.

Therefore, these results show that mass schools enable encounters with distinctiveness and weakness, and education is an opportunity to gain a variety of experiences, including learning about differences. It makes educational facilities a lens in which the problems of reality are focused.

However, media were mentioned as a primary source of information about Asperger's syndrome (61%). Less often, experts (21%) and dedicated literature (18%) were listed. The predominant role of media as a source of information can be a concern, as media use stereotypes that highlight outstanding abilities of mentally ill individuals - which increases viewership but stands in contrast with facts (Jarret).

Most respondents (86%) replied that parents of children with dysfunctions do not provide them with information about the child. This lack of willingness to inform about the disability may be caused by parental fear of social resentment that their child may experience as a stigma carrier, as well as the parent's difficulty reconciling with the child's disorder. To summarise, it should be noted that teacher knowledge about Asperger's syndrome can be selective, as shown in the following chapters.

The essence of Asperger's Syndrome in views of teachers

The respondents were asked to describe in their own words the heart of Asperger's syndrome. Their statements differed in semantic connotation.

The most commonly listed (78%) was the relationship of the said disorder with autism. As the following statement shows - "Asperger's syndrome is a general development disorder that fits in the autism spectrum" (32 years old female), "a mild variation of autism" (28-year-old). Lack of social skills was listed just as often - as shown by the following definition. "Asperger's syndrome is a disorder primarily involving impairment of social skills" (female, 39). Following statements direct are similar in tone, mentioning the isolation, difficulties in contact; "AS is a disorder that compromises social functioning, sick individuals isolate themselves from others, and it is challenging to establish contact with them." AS has also been described as indicating a specific response of the environment. The behaviour of the observers was described as follows: The behaviour of children with AS often arouses anxiety and disapproval of other people" (female, 35 years old)

There was also a tendency to identify AS as a disease with specific problems "AS is an illness manifested but the inability to maintain the correct emotions" (female, 25 years old),

Extraordinary abilities were not listed in the description. The way of describing Asperger syndrome indicates that the respondents have an adequate, but selective knowledge about AS. They recognize the limitations of affected people in social relationships. There was no mention of difficulties in terms of speech or distinctive interests as a clinical manifestation of Asperger's syndrome, which translates into problems in contact with other people. The presented statements may be considered consistent with the current scientific facts, but unrepresentative and superficial (Namysłowska, 2012, 135 - 138).

Causes of Asperger Syndrome

Studies have shown that seeing disorders as having biological causes, increases social distance, especially profound mental deficiencies, which trigger the perception

of individuals through the prism of biological weaknesses, which in turn induces an increase in distance to the affected person (Parchomiuk, 2013). For these reasons, the respondents were asked about their opinions on the causes of Asperger syndrome.

Most respondents identified neurological defects (90.5%) as a cause, which included unspecified congenital disabilities (73%). A similar number cited cerebral palsy (73.4%) and perinatal injuries (65.5%). Heavy metals poisoning (49%) was mentioned less often, parental addictions (44.0), severe infections (37%), inherited mental illness (37%) and preterm birth (27.4%). Fewer respondents pointed to toxoplasmosis (19%) and effects of vaccination (34%) as a cause of autism. A small group pointed to social grounds of autism - such as rejection mentioned by 8.3%, family pathologies (10.7%) and parental mistakes (2.3%).

The results pointed to the respondents' state of knowledge as both, diverging from and concurring with scientific facts. Although linking autism with biology is consistent with the current scientific knowledge, the respondents pointed to vague relationships with cerebral palsy, toxoplasmosis, heavy metal poisoning, infections. It is highly alarming that vaccination and heavy metal poisoning are listed as causes of autism. If such is the teacher's current state of knowledge, then they can pass it on to others, thus expanding ignorance and posing a risk of an outbreak of latent diseases.

Psychological traits of Asperger Syndrome children's

Didactic order and proper communication are essential in the work of the school. The first factor enables smooth conduct of classes; the second allows for efficient implementation of knowledge. The student is supposed to behave in the right way so as not to interfere with the order of the lesson. It is supposed to speak smoothly, express knowledge when he or she is asked to.

Meanwhile, most respondents attributed AS children with negative traits, which accounted for 79% of responses. These children were seen as carrying multiple stigmas of being weak, troublesome and demanding in care. Most often listed negative characteristics were reserve (84.5%), emotional instability (80%), maladjustment (76%), withdrawal (67.8%), confusion (63 %). Less often indicated (approximately 35% each) were avoiding visual contact, lack of understanding of social rules, anxiety, queer interests, repetitive routine and education problems. Reserve and instability cause teachers to have a problem adapting their working methods to the needs of a child.

The teachers were relatively less likely to indicate positive characteristics (21% of all indications). The AS children were seen as ambitious (37%), sensitive (44%), and talented (37%) – in short, they were perceived as having potential. At the same time, violence was rarely named (22%) and hypermobility (11%)

To sum up, it should be noted that, although the analysis of the semantic overtones of description of AS children revealed further manifestations of distance, this image did not portray them as a threat to the environment. This fact allows me to think that an AS child is rated as troublesome but at the same time, one with which you can cope. His problems make life more difficult for him than for others.

Access to children with developmental disabilities to attributes of attractiveness and normality.

People prefer interactions with people who offer them something – even it is improving well-being by associating with attractive individuals because beauty is a self-rewarding value. You can gain something from the wealthy, the well-educated, the healthy. Serenity, happiness, friendliness of the interaction partner is also essential (Brannon, 2002). Because of the above, the respondents were asked to assess the level of life satisfaction of children with developmental disorders, and then to estimate the access of these children to normalization attributes, which are social relations and experiences typical for their age.

Almost all the teachers stated that AS pupils are moderately happy at best. According to the respondents, there is no reason for happiness since every day the child, as is stated in the remainder of this study, is experiencing many problems. The results showed a lasting tradition of looking at an AS child through the lens of his weaknesses and difficulties. That fact is reflected in the stereotype of a person with disabilities as an unhappy and mourning their fate, striving for normality. This mindset illustrates the extension of the effects of the deficits on their whole existence. It reflects the thinking of Juvenal, who claimed that only “in a healthy body, a healthy mind”, and so only a happy, joyful spirit can only reside in a healthy body. An unhappy individual with developmental disorders is an unattractive interaction partner. The reasons why respondents consider disabled people dissatisfied should be sought in limited access to experiences typical of children, such as pleasures, interests, groups of friends. Teachers claimed that AS children have overprotective parents and benefit from education tailored to their special needs. It was less often stated that AS children had hobbies and entertainment, and it was most rarely listed they had friends. The suggested overprotectiveness of parents can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, it can indicate to the respondents of the parents ‘ focus on the child, their control and their rejection veiled by the appearance of care. Secondly, it may show respondents’ tendency to drop the entirety of responsibility for the child on the parents in order avoid thinking about the child’s problem. By indicating an AS child’s access to appropriate education should be interpreted as either a reflection of the factual situation - the experiences of teachers who observe the school’s individualization activities, or as a mental avoiding of responsibility for the child (the child’s education is organized, so I no longer have to worry about it).

The infrequent assumption that a child with autism has hobbies and entertainment may indicate the view that the child is overwhelmed by responsibilities associated with education and revalidation. Such a child has difficulties in learning, so he must work more and can’t have fun. It has no friends. Synthetically speaking, it can be said that autistic children are rated as students, regain efficiency, lonely, and as such, a child is not seen as an attractive interaction partner.

Social distance in the Bogardus option

In 1925 E. Bogardus proposed a tool called Bogardus' scale. The scale involves confronting the tested individual with hypothetical situations and determining the degree of acceptability of the contact with a stranger. Bogardus proposed a seven-degree scale, spread from a question of allowing a relationship with a stranger (*close kinship by marriage*) to exclusion from the country of the respondent (*exclude from my country*). For the next 80 years, the Bogardus scale (or rather its countless adaptations) has become a standard in the studies of sociological distance thanks to several indisputable advantages of this tool. The question remains who the strangers are. In the researches, the scale of Bogardus has traditionally placed ethnic, national and religious groups (Bogardus himself listed 40 such groups). It is worth noting. However, the most critical axes of signifying others are also cultural and clinical (biological), and the national/ethnic/religious divisions are secondary to them. The scale of Bogardus is also used to measure attitudes towards disabilities and sexual minorities (Bogardus, 1933, 265 – 271).

The advantages of the tool mentioned are as follows:

- Firstly, the survey refers to an imagined situation - there is no need for direct contact with a stranger to be able to imagine your reaction
- Secondly, contrary to appearances, the exact designation of the name is not relevant

As far as flaws go, the first is the inability to use this tool in transcultural comparisons. We do not always know when by the cultural norms differentiate regulating certain situations presented to the respondents (e.g. the question of an invitation of a stranger to their home, emotional relationships, etc.) and when it arises from actual prejudices. In this study, the intercultural thread was not present. Only Polish teachers were investigated. Secondly, as each cross-cutting study, the Bogardus study is sensitive to current historical events. This study considered the persistence of certain phenomena - such as the distancing of teachers towards pupils with disabilities

The respondents were asked about approving an AS child as an organ donor, as a family member, friend, co-worker, neighbor, member of the same organization.

Respondents declared approval of an AS child primarily as an organ donor (92%), less often as a neighbor (89%), and even less frequently as a family member (73%) or a member of the same organization (72%). They were unwilling to accept it as a friend (60%), even less willingly as a student (24%). The results can be interpreted in two ways. First, as an indicator of the child's instrumentalisation and combine it with previous data on the frequency of occurrence and permission for education in a specific institution. AS is thought of as frequently occurring and the teachers themselves stated that they met such a child - you can, therefore, say that the functioning of the child affected them is known, "tamed" and isn't feared, as evidenced by the consent for the child to study outside a special school. An AS child is treated as a desirable organ donor - the biological defect is not too threatening - if something occurs frequently, it becomes the norm, and a "normal" organ can be used. When compiling the information obtained here with the results of my research on the distance towards the child with developmental deficits

and work on children with intellectual disabilities, you may notice a smaller distance towards Asperger Syndrome children (Żuraw, 1998). There was a willingness to approve such a child as a family member while the other groups could at most expect approval as a colleague, classmate and as a neighbor.

The respondents commonly declared acceptance of an AS child as a neighbor. It is possible to take the view that the respondents approve a situation that they have no influence on, because it allows them to maintain a safe distance from the "stranger" and to show themselves in good light - they do not avoid contact with diverse people, they agree to their presence in some space of social life. A few respondents expressed their willingness to accept an AS child as a friend of their children or wards. The results showed that teachers could consider an AS child as a problem, so they would not want it among their pupils. However, the presented data can also be interpreted as expressing a consent to establish close relations with the AS child - it is seen as relatively harmless as it is considered weaker.

According to respondents, children with Asperger syndrome are often present at schools. They have difficulties in relationships with their age-mates. They are isolated, withdrawn, unadjusted, but not violent. They do not pose a threat. This factor causes a relatively small social distance manifested towards pupils with Asperger syndrome. The surveyed individuals expressed their willingness to accept such a child as a family member, organ donor, and a pupil of a mass school. The knowledge of the surveyed individuals about the causes of Asperger syndrome should be alarming. It was found that 20% of the surveyed individuals linked the origins of Asperger's syndrome with vaccinations. The media are a source of information.

Conclusion

Research results indicate that a child with Asperger's syndrome is thought as being weak two-fold, both as a child and as a person with disabilities. At the same time, daily direct contacts at schools allow a child to know and eliminate the fears aroused by people with mental health problems. This conclusion means that inclusive education fulfils its' tasks as a form of bemeeting of non-disabled people and people with disabilities. It is also essential to distribute scientific knowledge about the causes and effects of Asperger syndrome to prevent the spread of prejudices against vaccination.

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