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AUTISM BETWEEN THE PHD STUDENT AND THE PROMOTOR. A CASE STUDY*

Abstract. Contemporary societies struggle with the problem of education being inadequate to the reality. The crisis (and, consequently, the deficit) of authorities is present in all levels of education. It seems that the classical vertical mechanism “student-master” should experience a renaissance. Instead of theoretical argumentation, it is worth learning about the case of a particular relationship – between a doctoral student who is a non-speaking autistic person and the promotor who tries to oppose it constructively. Both lawyers (as the cooperation is currently taking place in doctoral law studies) apart from the preparation of the dissertation, are experimenting methodologically, entering the “student-master” relationship with mutual benefit. They are subject to ongoing verification in this area – both domestic and foreign.

Keywords: autism, disability, communication dysfunctions, teacher’s authority, the “student-master” relation.

Deeply involved in elevating qualifications and seeking solutions forced by the development of civilization, contemporary society unintentionally forgets about the human being. The new way of life, consumerism, as well as the pursuit of material values, inevitably makes societies approach the verge of chaos – primarily in the axiological sphere. The list of role models to follow becomes short. The resistance to enter vertical relationships results in resigning traditional universal values to the “fashionable”, seemingly beneficial, as at first glance they are more conducive to success. Considering this, it is worth focusing on the issue of the student-teacher relationship, clashing it with today’s extraordinary civilization challenge of autism. This

variant requires a lot of involvement from both the teacher and the student with the spectrum of autism.

In our deliberations, we start from the problem of subjectivity in the student-teacher relationship, the role of the teacher, then the specificity of the functioning of the student and the academic teacher in the conditions accompanying education deficit development will be addressed.

On subjectivity

Subjectivity is an ambiguous term. Many scientists (from different fields of study) have tried to determine what subjectivity is and how it can be analyzed. Krzysztof Korzeniowski examines subjectivity in three aspects:

- Subject activity – human participation in reality, human impact on this reality in a conscious and purposeful way;
- Actions undertaken by people must be conscious;
- Subjectivity is also psychological separateness and autonomy, the subject becomes a source of its own action (Korzeniowski K., 1983, p. 45).

The human being is a social being, hence, their subjectivity cannot exist outside a social context. Józef Górniewicz states: “the subject is one who actively participates in the structuring and restructuring of reality in its various aspects” (Górniewicz J., 1997, p. 24). Human beings are creators of action based on their own values. Tadeusz Tomaszewski, on the other hand, believes that subjectivity is being someone possessing a specific identity that distinguishes them from others, and showing that one’s own activity depends largely on oneself (Tomaszewski T., 1977, p. 67). The criteria of subjectivity include:

- The internal organization of the human being, the relationships that connect them to the environment, and the influence exerted on their surroundings;
- The ability to recognize their objective situation;
- The ability to interpret and select information according to the task (Pomykało W., 1993, p. 596).

Wincenty Okoń points out that the determinant of the subjective functioning of students in the education process is the recognition of each student as a fully autonomous individual who is entitled to internal independence and responsibility for his conduct (Okoń W., 1995, p. 180).

As it appears from the above definitions, the idea of subjectivity is analyzed in different ways. On the one hand, it is the development potential, the individuality owned by an individual, the creation of one’s own image,

the relation to the surrounding reality, and in the academic community it is especially an equal contribution of the student and of the academic teacher to the education process.

In the area of higher education, subjectivity occurs as a specific type of communication and interaction among participants in the learning process. It is associated with authenticity in the course of educational activities. Following the same trait, subjectivity in this aspect is the ability to develop relationships ready to foster a knowledge-enriching dialogue. This approach and definition of the term favours the formation of a full-fledged unit. Subjectivity in academic relations certainly must be considered from two perspectives – the teacher’s and the student’s.

The Vertical Academic Relation

The academic teacher is a manager, an inspirer who is required to provide not only effective teaching, but also a mature personality attitude manifested in the subjective treatment of his/her students. It must be stressed that the lecturer should play a role in the student’s life not only as a teacher, but also as a mentor. The modern human being is often lost in the world of values, the ambiguity of social phenomena, and the inability to decipher basic scientific truths. Indicating the right way and showing alternative solutions to life problems should be tasks for the academic teacher with an individual approach to the student, openness to their problems and expectations regarding education. “Modern” education involving adult students is oriented towards the development of subjectivity, towards relations open to mutual interpenetration of worlds, views, and experiences.

Subjectivity in work and approach to the student manifests itself in the attitude of acceptance of students. It means that the teacher puts them on an equal footing to himself/herself, allowing for spontaneous expression, exchange of views, presentation of their own understanding of phenomena. Studying is a search for solutions, asking questions, and awakening personalities to fully understand surrounding social processes. The student experiences subjective treatment when the teacher uses a negotiating teaching style (Gołębniak B. D., 2004, p. 165). The success of a real “human encounter” depends on the way in which the classes are being taught and what relationships the lecturer builds (Popławska A., 2007, p. 45). Openness and favourable atmosphere created by the academic teacher triggers the desire for self-education. Sincerity and authenticity as the qualities of subjectivity in academic relationships form the maturity of an individual.

However, not everyone is capable of shaping a discourse making it possible to cross the limits of one's own weaknesses...

This issue constitutes a significant part of the field of pedagogy, identifying the status of a human being possessing cognitive and moral autonomy. Relationships of a subjective nature build largely on the personality traits of the academic teacher who influences the development of his/her students through an attitude directed towards the student and creating a specific scientific ambience. The fact is that modern education, and especially higher education, is intended to stimulate an autonomous search for truth, evaluation of reality, and improvement of one's own skills. The student plays a key role as a subject who works with the teacher by pursuing appropriate goals, using content and applying learning methods. Pedagogues emphasize that the subjectivity in relationships between academic teachers and students is based on conscious mutual activity and cooperation (Gurycka A., 1979, p. 19). Relationships between students and lecturers significantly shape the attitude of young people to life, reality, and further education. It is important here to identify authorities.

On Authority

In search of answers to the crisis or new quality of authority, attention should be paid to different understandings of the concept. The term "authority" is widely used; however, it turns out to be difficult to define unequivocally.

Today, it is accepted that authority means "social recognition, prestige of individuals, groups and social institutions, based on values recognized in the given society, as well as people or institutions of recognition" (Nowy leksykon PWN, 1998, p. 103). One of the first definitions of authority in the pedagogical literature was presented by Henryk Rowid stating that it is "a certain inherent property in a person or institution, through which other persons, institutions and social groups more or less voluntarily become subordinated to them" (Rowid H., 1946, *Podstawy i zasady wychowania*, as cited in: Badura E., 1981, p. 52). According to Ryszard Stach, "authority is recognition and social respect attributed to a person, a social group or an institution. The source of authority can be skills and knowledge, personal qualities, ways of behaving and acting in accordance with universally appreciated values, as well as social status or position" (Stach R., 1998, pp. 27–30). Mentioning the quality in academic relations based on the authority or mastery of the academic teacher, one cannot over-

look the views formulated by Maria Żebrowska who (in collaboration with Barbara Łuczyńska) perceives authority as “an outcome of one- or two-sided interactions between two persons, two groups or a person and a group in which one of the parties acquires a tendency to model their way of thinking or attitude or behaviour compliant with the patterns of thinking, attitude, behaviour represented by the other party” (Żebrowska M., Łuczyńska B., 1969, pp. 384 et seq.). The definitions emphasize the importance of building relationships between the participants in academic education. The process of entering a dialogue situation at a modern university should be a priority. It stimulates in young people a positive approach towards a number of socially important issues, developing open attitudes, as well as the ability to see another person as the greatest value. Analyzing the issue of the academic teacher and their authority in terms of a new quality or crisis, it is worth considering who the teacher is today and what is required from university lecturers in the 21st century.

On the Academic Teacher and the Role of the Promotor

The teacher’s profession is – without exaggeration – as old as the world. His image has evolved along with the changing socio-economic conditions, but the core of the profession still involves the desire to educate the young generation to be good members of a society. In Antiquity, the teacher was supposed to meet the demands of society, to act in accordance with requirements of the times, and as emphasized by Wiesław Wołoszyn-Spirka, “give students what is acceptable, reject what is superfluous, take care of their physical fitness and general culture, and, above all, prepare for proper actions in public life” (Wołoszyn-Spirka W., 2001, p. 88). The subsequent epochal periods brought new challenges to the teacher shaping the new professional personality of the teacher. “The contemporary image of the teaching profession, as an intellectual and social formation [as Włodzimierz Prokopiuk writes] – is definitely more differential, as evidenced by:

- the tendency to “pass” some functions of the teaching profession to various social institutions, which results in intensification of crisis phenomena within its context,
- the ambiguous assessment of the profession’s prestige as an indicator of the social status of teachers in democratizing Poland. There are three standpoints: the science and pedagogical one placing the teacher’s profession at the highest level of social satisfaction; the governmental one officially declaring recognition and support for the teaching group, with-

out meeting its social and living needs; and the still low assessment of their own situation by teaching pedagogues,

- the social status of Polish teachers for years having the tendency of “descending group mobility”. The long-lasting situation of social deprivation has caused alienation of teachers from the problems and values of contemporary culture, from school, families, and environmental activity. As a result, their “preserving” roles and behaviour patterns have become visible, as compared to progressive attitudes and initiatives of other professions, parents, and most importantly – students (Prokopiuk W., 2007, p. 30).

Jerzy Niemiec emphasizes: “we are all entangled in the present” (Niemiec J., 2007, p. 16). Contemporary changes force teachers to reflect on their own work, not only in terms of formal and program requirements, but, primarily, in terms of broadly defined educational problems of the young generation. Turning away from humanistic values makes society become limited. The so-called “rat race” present from the lowest level of education causes anomy. Much is said about crises occurring on many levels of human life. It results from the above-mentioned development of a society oriented on material values and lost in the world of humanistic values. Today, the teacher’s role in higher education is important and very difficult. Students seeking their place and their way of life are increasingly demanding against their mentors/masters. Engaging in relationships with the lecturer, they draw attention to many factors shaping an open dialogue. They analyze components hierarchizing individual elements, forming the pyramid of factors building the authority of the academic teacher. In addition, the role of promotor as doctoral advisor has its specificity.

Autism as an Educational Obstacle

Autism is associated with serious quantitative and qualitative disorders in communication, in the social sphere and in behaviour. There is a group of autistic people who do not communicate verbally. Due to the depth of their autistic disorders, verbal speech has not developed. Most often, such people are recognized as low-functioning and their school duties often get deferred. Maciej Oksztulski – a co-author and the main subject of this study – used to be included in this category.

Autism is more often referred to as a civilization disease, since the number of people affected by it is increasing year by year. The national data is constantly changing, but it is estimated that the number of people with

autism is in the tens of thousands, although data on the number of children and adults is missing. In the near future, autism, along with cancer, AIDS or diabetes, will become one of the most serious problems affecting human health. In 1994, autism was categorized as a Pervasive Developmental Disorder (PDD). Each person with this disorder is individually different, so the place of autism among other disorders is constantly changing. Its clinical image is very complex and the causes of the disease are generally unknown. People with autism differ from each other, on the one hand, with regard to level of intelligence, on the other hand – with regard to the extent and depth of the disorder. Scientific research has proved that, despite the presence of some similarities in autistic people, significant differences between such people are predominant (Bluestone J., 2012, p. 1.). The autism spectrum disorder includes three spheres of brain dysfunction: impaired social interactions, verbal and nonverbal communication disorders, and challenges in interest and social activity. These symptoms appear in the first years of a child's life and in a greater or lesser degree last generally a lifetime. In order to help an autistic person they should be diagnosed as early as possible and then intensively rehabilitated.

Currently people with autism can benefit from special, integrated, and public education. Such schools are attended not only by higher functioning children, but also by those who cause greater educational problems. According to the Act of 7 September 1991 on the System of Education: “A child with autism spectrum disorder or pervasive developmental disorder may conduct compulsory schooling in a public school, in an integration school, in an integration class, in a special school in a special ward and in other alternative forms authorized by Polish law”. It all depends on how soon after the diagnosis the decision about early treatment and education is made. On the one hand, due to it the child sooner finds himself/herself in a school reality, but on the other hand, intensive work must be done with them from the moment he/she is diagnosed until he/she is enrolled in school. Everything is based on an opinion on the need for early support in the child's development or on the basis of a certificate on the need for special education if the child starts school in a preschool group (Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 4 April 2005). Autistic children of pre-school age are not able to make contact with their peers; they isolate themselves. They are hyperactive, they follow their own patterns, and any reaction of the environment can cause their aggression. Autistic children have great difficulties in communicating; they do not know how to play with their peers, as other children are not attractive to them. They are also unattractive to their peers. They often become angry; aggression and auto-aggression occur.

According to Gałka and Pęczkowska, early support and activities should include: support for family members, rehabilitation of neurophysiological disorders, specialized medical care, working on communication skills, interactions engaging speech and communication development, diagnosis of cognitive functioning and readiness of the child to learn, introduction to education, to a peer group, and the child's empowerment (Gałka U., Pęczkowska E., 2009).

During the school period communication disorders and other “stereotypical” individual behaviours still occur (Bobkowicz-Lenartowska L., 2011, pp. 18–19, 23, 51–57, 64–67). Many autistic children in this age show talent in some area, such as mathematics, fine arts, music, or foreign languages. Unfortunately, the ability of abstract thinking, understanding of the context of a conversation or intonation is disturbed. The lack of contact with peers is a great problem. They are often misunderstood, ridiculed, unable to communicate with them (Błeszyński J., 2005, pp. 100, 129–133). They go “their own way”, often trying to get in close contact with the teachers. They do not notice their own differences. They are disturbed by the noise at school, by constant changes. Much depends on the conditions that the school can provide. According to Gałka and Pęczkowska, emphasis should be placed on providing teachers with a broad knowledge of autism, organizing the school environment, elimination of excessive sensory stimuli, co-operating with institutions providing paediatric counselling, setting up individual education programs, revalidation classes and constant contact and cooperation with parents – as most information about the child comes to teachers from them.

Autism Atypical (by Nature)

Autism is characterized by difficulty in communicating with other people and making social connections. People with autism avoid eye contact and physical contact with another person. They usually find it very difficult to control emotions; they are hyperactive. Sometimes (as in the case of the co-author) there is also hypersensitivity of the senses and the lack of speech ability. Then such an autistic person feels better in a quiet place, where there are not many people, and the senses are not overloaded with external stimuli. Often, autism is associated with various degrees of mental retardation. However, this is not a rule – for example the co-author's case is specific, because he does not have mental retardation, and on the contrary acquires knowledge with great ease, with superior intelligence.

Maciej Oksztulski was diagnosed with autism when he was 4 years old. Then it turned out that no one in Białystok was prepared to help autistic people. He went to the “*Dać Szansę*” (“Give a Chance”) centre for mentally handicapped people – although in his case mental impairment was excluded! Visits to the centre were to take place once a month. Unfortunately, the beautiful slogan “integration” did not consider autistic people at that time. People were afraid of people with autism spectrum disorder. The first step towards integration was *de facto* done by coercing the local government to accept the co-author to the integration pre-school. His determined mother struggled for her son not to be placed in a special school. He started the primary school period in an integration class, which, by the way, was not easy to create. After two weeks he was directed to individual teaching which unfortunately consisted of only four hours a week (then the Regulation of the Minister of National Education and Sport on the method and mode of organizing individual teaching provided that a student of grades 1–3 using individual teaching receives from 4 up to 6 hours per week). At the same time as the struggle for school placement, parents of autistic children established a regional branch of the National Autism Society (*Krajowe Towarzystwo Autyzmu*) in Białystok, within which the Center for Children and Youth with Autism Features was founded (see: www.kta.bialystok.pl). Due to his outstanding level of intelligence, the co-author was transferred from 1st to 4th grade and received an individualized tuition of 8 hours per week.

He got to high school with very good results. He completed the first grade, obtaining the highest mark in mathematics. After completing the first grade, he also received an individual curriculum in chemistry for highly gifted students. At the same time, due to his lack of independence, he was exempted from the requirement of the end-of-school test by the District Examination Board (the system was unable to handle such examinations). In high school, the number of hours awarded for individual teaching increased to 12 weeks (he completed 14 subjects).

To be able to obtain the high school diploma, the form of the exam was specially adapted to his individual needs, including a separate room and a computer; the time of the exam was extended by a 30-minute break, if necessary. There was a supportive teacher who emotionally protected the co-author throughout the secondary school-leaving examination. It is worth mentioning that the third high school grade was a breakthrough for the co-author. Nobody expected him to become a finalist of the 4th European Social and Legal Competition at the European stage in Brussels, finalist of the 12th Legal Knowledge Competition at the central stage, finalist of

the Competition on Human Rights, and finalist of the 13th Competition on the European Union. Due to the results of the competitions, he was able to choose between different courses of study at many universities in Poland. His successes led to the fact that he twice received the scholarship of the President of Białystok for his learning achievements and results. After making a difficult choice, he finally selected law studies at the Faculty of Law at the University of Białystok and in 2010 he became a student of the first year, being the first mute autistic student in Poland. On the one hand, the period of studies appeared as an unlimited field of opportunity, and on the other hand – of new unknown difficulties, anxiety and fear whether they may be overcome. The first days at the University were filled with concerns about whether and how the co-author would be accepted by the academic community.

As a disabled person, he also used the scholarship for disabled students. Every year, he applied to the National Fund for Rehabilitation of Disabled Persons (*Państwowy Fundusz Rehabilitacji Osób Niepełnosprawnych, PFRON*) for co-financing from the STUDENT II program. Pursuant to Resolution No. 849 of the Senate of the University of Białystok of 23 March 2009 regarding *the principles of introducing and applying alternative solutions facilitating studying to students with disabilities at the University of Białystok*, he has received alternative education forms for disabled students, which are necessary for the whole study period:

- 1) Using computer as a basic communication tool,
- 2) Constant presence of communication assistants,
- 3) The ability to take notes using a computer and record classes using a dictaphone,
- 4) Enabling individual examinations,
- 5) Modification in conditions of written examinations to computer-assisted writing, extension of the exam time up to approx. 50% of the predicted time, an individual form, attendance of the assistant.

The University seeks to broadly open itself to students with different disabilities and to make their educational opportunities equal. To achieve this, a Centre for the Support of Students and Doctoral Students with Disabilities was established at the University of Białystok and a Plenipotentiary for Persons with Disabilities was assigned. They seek to provide the best possible conditions for students with disabilities and offer them personalized support, due to which they become active participants in the academic community; many of them are highly successful academics (see: www.uwb.edu.pl/pelnomocnik-ds-osob-niepelnosprawnych). The key facilitation provided by the University to the co-author has been in practice the support

of an assistant who introduces academic teachers to the specific education of a person with autism.

It should be noted that during his studies the co-author used alternative forms of physical education and took part in the 9th National Meeting of Students with Disabilities in Cracow. He was a member of the Student Research Circle on International Law and Human Rights and (at present) the INNOWACJA Scientific Circle. He has published papers and successfully participated in competitions of academic knowledge. This was also possible thanks to certain academic teachers from the Law Faculty of the University of Bialystok who were ready to try to embrace the specifics of a person with an autism spectrum disorder. Studies were also methodological education, as the co-author taught himself to study on a regular basis. He struggled with himself. Others also “studied him”. He experienced a lot of goodwill, but some people did not make it easy for him to study.

The inability to verbally communicate his thoughts did not prevent him from effectively doing so in written form. This was proved in preparing his master’s thesis entitled “The right of people with autism to work in law and practice (on the example of Podlaskie Voivodeship)” under the supervision of Professor Maciej Perkowski (the second co-author) and defending it on June 2, 2015. In his thesis, he combined theoretical assumptions on the labour market with realities, while performing an effective experiment. He started feeling passion... During the seminars he tried to talk... After the thesis’ defense, he carefully said “thank you”....

The Beginning of Cooperation (Recruitment and Doctoral Studies)

Participating in classes with an assistant, a total lack of verbal communication, a laptop as an indispensable attribute and a basic communication tool in writing, poor performance of the arm and the need to support it while writing, poor facial expressions, avoidance of eye contact, the impression that he is uninterested in what is happening around him, that he does not even follow conversations, though concerning him personally – all this caused a feeling of great confusion, of helplessness, the impression of a man controlled and led by an assistant who, in addition, is his mother. Such a state of affairs contributed to the refusal to accept Maciej Oksztulski, MA, in doctoral studies at the Faculty of Law at the University of Bialystok. Formally, it can be somehow understood, because substantive dilemmas were present. The master thesis supervisor

was sincerely hesitant whether recommending an autistic student to a doctoral candidate did not bring unrealistic expectations that could not be fulfilled. Ultimately, optimism and a fair search for the truth prevailed. Professor Perkowski's support was not enough for the recruitment commission. One of the members stated that the co-author should give up because he would never give lectures since he still did not speak. And he would not pass exams. The recruitment commission rejected its candidacy. The Professor suggested that Mr Oksztulski should appeal the decision. Maciek wrote in it: "In the situation when it turns out that I am unable to meet the demands placed upon me, I have the strength to withdraw myself". The Rector supported the appeal and the student again faced the commission. This time he heard that there are no lectures without speaking. Then Professor Perkowski intervened: "Do not worry. My future doctoral student will lead classes like Stephen Hawking of Cambridge University – using a speech synthesizer." By Decision No15/Uzupel_PR_S3/2015 of 23.09.2015, Maciej Oksztulski was admitted to the first year of full-time third-cycle doctoral studies at the Faculty of Law of the University of Białystok in the academic year 2015/2016. The commission agreed on his admission with a reservation. It allowed him to finish the first year within two years. The co-author did not need that much time. As one of the first students he completed the winter and summer semesters. Even then, the member of the commission who had not wanted to accept him admitted that it was better.

There are at least two reasons that decided that the co-author became a PhD student in law. The first is objective – the writing of the thesis and conducting research awakened his scientific passion. He loves to read, to face intellectual challenges. Naturally, he is concerned with human rights issues, in particular the rights of people with disabilities. He believes that his reflections on this subject may help to look at the issues of the rights of persons in a different way. The second reason is more mundane. In his master's thesis he drew a sad conclusion. Despite the potentially wide offer and many forms of support for people with disabilities who want to start employment, the regional labour market offered him nothing, even though he applied for jobs. This led to the search for a meaningful social role, on the one hand, and at the same time he attempted to explain the abnormal situation. So all the causes "merged" and he became a PhD student. He firmly believes that the University of Białystok will allow him to use the rights guaranteed by the University and the Republic of Poland to participate fully in education and research, as well as it will fulfil the obligation imposed on public HEIs to ensure equal opportunities for disabled people

in education. While he will do his best to meet the requirements placed upon him to bring glory to the University and work for its development and good name.

The Foundations of the Cooperation

As a PhD student Maciej Oksztulski is not only writing his dissertation. He is a member of the research team in the project “NO-AUTism! Education and personal development of a PhD student with autism – the *status quo* and interdisciplinary optimization of social and professional perspectives” being implemented from the beginning of the academic year 2015/2016. As part of the project, the PhD student is the researcher and the subject of research. The specially formed interdisciplinary team consisting of professionals from all disciplines – lawyers, pedagogues, physicians, doctoral students and students – develops and implements methods that will allow autistic doctoral students to complete doctoral studies and contribute to its effective employment. Within the project, in November 2017, a research trip to the USA (the co-author assisted by his mother – Mrs Danuta Oksztulska, Dr Izabela Kraśnicka and a student – Wojciech Zoń) was completed, as well as the equipment and software needed to improve communication was purchased, and the project was promoted (through a video and by information in leading media – see the links in the references section).

The doctoral student constantly strives to improve his scientific workshop (e.g. participating in scientific events, development of scientific materials, trainings). He publishes, takes part in conferences in Poland and abroad.

The doctoral student realizes that in his life much depends on others. However, the presence, support and help of others does not deprive him of the decisive role in his life, does not detract from his accomplishments and personal endeavours; the support is only a necessary condition for developing himself as an autonomous entity. His capacities and potential have not been suppressed and unused, and they are awakened and developed with his daily work, with great perseverance, enthusiasm, and initiative. Together with others, his aspirations get a real perspective, the presence of friendly and supportive people adds strength and perseverance, and sharing difficulties makes them an individual tragedy, becoming what connects and unites people. Maciej Oksztulski is surrounded by a friendly band today, a well-liked and valued colleague, a member of the seminar group in which he plays an important role. It is also important that the student’s zeal and tireless efforts make it impossible to deny the help that he needs.

The Implementation of Cooperation

It is difficult to mention everything. The subject of the dissertation is: “The right to education of people with autism. The international status quo and the reconstruction of the concept from the perspective of Poland”. The subject, however, does not limit the doctoral student’s research interest.

In connection with the tenth anniversary of Poland’s membership in the European Union, at the conference organized by Europe Direct in Słupsk (5–6.05.2014), as a student of the fourth year of law, he actively participated in the paper entitled “Access to education and work for people with disabilities in the aspect of autistic disability”. The work was published by Europe Direct as part of a project co-financed by the EU within the grants for the points in 2014.

In 2016, the study entitled “The right to consent for an autistic patient” was published in the monograph “Patient’s Rights” edited by U. Drozdowska and A. Wnukiewicz-Kozłowska (Warszawa: Difin, 2016). Another paper entitled “The Right to Dignity of People with Autism” was published in the monograph entitled “Internationalization of National Legal Transactions” edited by M. Perkowski and W. Zon (Białystok: Prawo i Partnerstwo, 2016, ISBN: 978-64474-02-6). In another monograph, the article entitled “The right of people with autism to proper housing conditions” will be published in 2017. It is worth pointing out that the article entitled “The right to education for people with autism in Polish higher education – assumptions and practical experience on the example of the NO-AUTism project”, in which Maciej is a co-author, was qualified for publication in the “Chowanna” magazine (No. 2/2017). Currently he is working on an article (co-authored with W. Zon) about the legal regulation of autism in US federal law, to which the trip to the United States (Syracuse University) successfully contributed. Simultaneously, Maciej Oksztulski is participating in the statutory research of the Department of International Public Law entitled “Development of international law and internationalization of national law” since 2015. In addition, he willingly takes part in conferences and symposia. For example, he actively participated in the 2nd National Students’ Disability Forum in Lodz in 2016, 15–17.04.2016 (with the paper entitled “The right to education” delivered jointly with the doctoral student Konrad Wnorowski). He also participated in the seminar “Persons with disabilities, creators of their own development” (Białystok, 22.03.2016, with the paper entitled “Legal aspects of independence of persons with disabilities”). In the home faculty, Oksztulski participated in the international scientific seminar “Unity or diversity of the academic world? Interna-

tional exchange of experiences” on 9.11.2016, delivering the paper “People with disabilities in higher education on the example of Podlaskie Province”. In the region he participated in the seminar entitled “In the world of Autistic Adults” organized by the State Higher School of Informatics and Entrepreneurship in Lomza (on 24.03.2017 with the paper titled “Everyday he proves that nothing is possible”) and the conference “Autism on a daily basis” at the Special Education and Training Center No 1 in Suwalki (organized on 1.04.2017 with the lecture “The future – the great unknown”). In the near future a debate evaluating the PhD student’s and the team’s visit to the US, as well as its influence on the dissertation and methodology of scientific work, is going to be held.

The Future of the Cooperation

In the case of non-speaking autistic people the way to communicate – in principle – is in written form. Some autistic people, however, have problems with the so-called fine motor skills, which means serious difficulty in writing (especially handwriting). The co-author is an example. It must be borne in mind that a person with an autism spectrum disorder has limited eye contact; they do not normally refer to a person with whom they are talking. It does not mean that they do not hear or listen, just the opposite (they hear, see and understand). While communicating, the person with autism does not need to look at another person, which gives the impression that words fall into the void; they are not addressed and do not count as communication acts. If the person with autism is looking in the same direction, it does not mean that they see the same thing. Maciej Oksztulski is a person with an autism spectrum disorder and as a non-speaking person he is unable to conduct a traditional conversation. He also understands that because of this there are concerns about his educational path as a doctoral student, and later – as a doctor. It is not possible for him to teach or lecture in the classical form, although this does not mean that it is not possible to conduct them at all. The man who proved it and inspired Maciej to work and overcome subsequent obstacles is Professor Stephen Hawking from the University of Cambridge – a university cooperating with the University of Bialystok. Although he is almost paralyzed and cannot speak, he teaches thousands of people with whom he communicates using a speech synthesizer. Professor Hawking’s case fills the co-author with hope that he as well could share his knowledge with devices that would “speak” for him. It would certainly be a unique and interesting experience, both for the doc-

toral student and for those who would attend his classes. This assumption seems to get confirmation in the reaction of participants in conferences and seminars in which Oksztulski has participated.

E-learning technologies give today many opportunities in the field of distance communication. Also, classes led by a doctoral student based on modern technology are available for effective implementation on a larger scale. Currently the co-author (on the basis of co-operation) has run classes in master's seminars and seminars.

The autism does not take from Maciej Oksztulski a sense of rational thinking and a clear assessment of his chances. He knows that there may be obstacles on his way that will be difficult to overcome. His past life, however, also posed challenges to him and he can now say that he overcame them as well as he could. Now he deeply believes that he will be able to cope with the challenges that are ahead of him. In a situation where it is impossible to meet the demands placed upon him, he has the strength to withdraw. Although he hopes that will not be necessary.

He hopes that the promotor will accept (not uncritically of course) the first part of his dissertation. He would like to publish several articles successfully. He evaluates the effects of going to the United States (Syracuse University College of Law). When he was leaving, he hoped that he would find there an antidote for his limitations, or at least inspirations. He also wanted to obtain materials and information useful for his dissertation. Of course, he did not find the antidote, but he became very empowered. Americans make excellent proof of the unrestricted ability of people with disabilities (e.g. the Dean of the Faculty of Law at the Syracuse University – Prof. Schwartz is a deaf person, and effectively gives lectures and directs the University). It got confirmed that the methods that the co-author had worked out were good. He received more advice on technical and methodological solutions. The terms of further cooperation will be provided in an agreement between the Universities (Syracuse and Białystok). He still hopes to “open the Podlaskie labour market for autistic people”. He would not like to leave Białystok due to family reasons, his likings and habits. His further plans are, of course, the defense of the doctorate thesis and taking up a job. It cannot be denied that education is a platform on which he remains a fully autonomous and successful autistic young man, despite the autism.

Analysing the influence of other people on Maciej Oksztulski's life, one should firstly mention the sacrifice and devotion of his mother, not forgetting about his father as well as the two older brothers who have linked their professional lives to helping people affected by autism. An illness in the

family teaches reverence, humility, love and devotion. This is what happened in his family, which stayed strong, despite so many adversities.

Maciej did not give up what is very important and necessary to him – hope and work on the development of speech. Throughout his life, he has remained a non-speaking man trying to get away with it and enjoy what he has. He took up the most difficult and least exciting challenge – speech therapy classes and daily home exercises. It seems that he treats it as a challenge and in spite of his fate he wants to overcome his impotence. It is his personal success – he has started talking. He hopes that if verbal communication is improved, then it will be possible to support the use of a speech synthesizer in a comfortable formula, which will increase the prospects for further cooperation with the University.

Unfortunately – the right to work from the formal point of view for autistic people remains... “autistic”. At present people with autism spectrum disorder practically do not work in Poland. The jurisdiction in our country has not recorded a single working claim regarding employment of a person with autism spectrum disorder. It should be recalled that the Act on occupational and social rehabilitation and employment of persons with disabilities (Journal of Laws from 1997, No 123, item 776) and the Social Welfare Act (Journal of Laws from 2017, item 1769) should guarantee people with disabilities some functioning in the labour market and a level of social security that would not leave such people marginalized. In practice it is quite the opposite, because not doing so the regulations deepen the marginalization of people with the autism spectrum. It must therefore be concluded that the right to work is not sufficiently guaranteed for people with autism. In exceptional cases, they use pilot projects where a limited number of autistic people receive temporary work. Here two hopes appear to Maciej Oksztulski: a small one – for a personal exception, and a big one – for positive systemic changes.

Between the Doctoral Student and the Promotor

It should be emphasized that the doctoral student has met many good people on the path of his life, although he has also struggled with human unfriendliness. The doctoral supervisor (promotor) of Maciej Oksztulski's master and Ph.D. theses in the Department of International Public Law is Professor Maciej Perkowski (also the Vice-Dean of the Faculty of Law at the University of Białystok) who got involved in supporting his student in an above-standard way.

The acquaintance between the doctoral student and the promotor started in the winter of 2008, when Maciej qualified for the regional stage of the Competition on European Union. The chairman of the jury was Dr Maciej Perkowski (then an assistant professor at the Faculty of Law, University of Białystok). An individual approach to the disabled student made a great impression on him. Dr Perkowski allowed the student to use a letter board and a computer, to benefit from the extended duration of the exam, the help of an assistant, and exchange of the oral examination with a written form. This commanded respect in Maciej Oksztulski. It was not done without disbelief. At first the future promotor thought that maybe the statements given by the assisting mother were her projections (to cheer her son's spirit). But then he realized that when his mother spoke in his own name expressions were simple and natural, and when she spoke on behalf of her son (which he showed on a special letter board), the statements were formulated very carefully, full of substantive concepts and differing significantly. The promotor quickly rejected the misleading idea. Maciej Oksztulski was the only first year student to qualify for the central stage in Szczecin. The student was overwhelmed with joy since, despite so much adversity, he got a chance to further develop. The form of communication that Maciej had worked out was not approved with Maciej Perkowski's enthusiasm, who stated that it was good that such a form was established, but that it would not replace speech, although it communicates (he meant the need to search for a solution where the final result would be verbalized statements). Today, the Professor has not changed his mind and he has not come to terms with this form of communication, which is weighing the doctoral student down. It should be emphasized that the presence of a young person in the Faculty of Law with letter boards (cards) and a computer can irritate many academics, but not a promotor who always finds time (and much time is needed) to let him express himself, even though the student tries to give concise and concrete answers. The Professor knows that during his written communication Maciej's thoughts are ahead of his deeds. The gentlemen have worked out a peculiar form of "reading intentions". The empathetic supervisor asks as many questions as possible so the student can decide: "yes" or "no" (the doctoral student repeats the definite answer), and more developed questions are conveyed after some time (meanwhile the promotor deals with other doctoral students, etc.) or online.

When Maciej as a student of the 4th year at the Faculty of Law undertook to write a master's thesis, he came to Prof. Perkowski who, with immediate empathy, took on the role of thesis promotor. Since then, they have started to get to know and understand each other. The preparation of

the thesis as well as the research related to it allowed him to familiarize with issues related to the autism spectrum. At the beginning of the seminars, the promotor let the student walk freely (walking in the classroom, etc.), but quickly he came to the conclusion that Maciej should be treated equally with other students and at the same time to dedicate more time to him individually. The mother, who all the time was (and is) his assistant, did not mention that after a long seminar, after coming home the student would be very excited and need to take a bath as soon as possible to relax – that would help. Now, after returning home, Maciej takes a shower, has dinner and goes to bed. It often happened that the Professor let students wait long. While autistic people are characterized by the fact that everything has to be done at a certain time (it is not allowed to violate their rhythm of work), the Professor taught Maciej to quit that habit. Today, he can wait for other people for up to two hours, because he knows they will not disappoint and will come to settle his case. The help coming from the Professor is very important. The doctoral student notices that if the promotor does not know how he can help, he approaches the problem from different angles until he finds a solution. Maciej knows that the Professor is aware of the doctoral student's situation for whom education is a form of scientific work, rehabilitation, socialization, and blazing trails for other people with autism. Maciej Perkowski's approach to the doctoral student is based on equal treatment of all students, and a student with a disability does not have to prove anything to anyone. The lack of eye contact is characteristic of autistic individuals, and this feature is common to all people with autism spectrum disorders. The Professor still does not deal well with this dysfunction of the doctoral student. At the beginning of their acquaintance, the Professor while talking to the student made eye contact with him, which made Maciej a little irritated. At present, the Professor only speaks to Maciej who is asked to confirm that the doctoral student hears and understands, sometimes nodding or muttering. Maciej values the language and forms of the promotor's statements. It seems that the gentlemen have found a common language, despite all the adversities.

It should be recalled that the aim of Maciej Oksztulski's MA thesis was to determine how Polish law and the realities of the labour market make it possible to implement the right to work for people with disabilities – with autism. Empirically, positive employers' declarations were obtained in the abstract context of employing a talented autistic person. However, when the empirical result was specified – through individualized job applications – no offer (literally) returned. The Professor did not give up and when an offer finally appeared, he – *de facto* – forced Maciej to take up the job for

a probationary period. To Maciej the job was humiliating, as the employer, unable to communicate with him, entrusted him with banal, repetitive office-technical activities. The employment was finally not prolonged beyond the trial period. Since then the Professor (already two years) has not returned to this topic, but it must be stated that the problem is not forgotten and he is looking for a solution....

The joint problems and results resulted in the planning and implementation of the project “NO AUTISM! Personnel education and development with autism – status quo and interdisciplinary optimization of social and professional perspectives”. The project which involves an interdisciplinary team of specialists in the fields of law, medicine, pharmacy, pedagogy, psychology, speech therapy and computer science, aims to support both the scientific and social development of Maciej Oksztulski through the development of innovative strategies and technologies, This will not only help Maciej to further develop his career, but may also be beneficial for a greater number of people affected by communication disabilities, including those who are mute or deaf. The Professor is trying with all his resources to raise funds for the implementation of the above project, as well as other friendly people’s help. In particular Agnieszka Jabłońska, a qualified professional advisor who also participates in the project’s substantive part. manages the preparation and implementation of the project. The efforts have been successful, and the financial support from Bank Zachodni WBK (Santander Universidades Program), obtained in 2016, allowed for more efficient work, and thus directly affected Maciej’s life, and indirectly many others’ (the trip to the USA, speech therapy, trips, promotion, others).

It does not always go the way it was planned. The Professor also has doubts, wondering if autonomy and independence are possible. It should be emphasized that Maciej’s dysfunction will remain for the rest of his life; it can be partially offset, but it is difficult to predict. The effort brings further successes, in short – it is better to obtain education than not to have it. The motto in the cooperation is: *let’s help, instead of making life difficult*. It seems that the cooperation is experiencing progress and has a chance for good prospects, especially since the gentlemen have become peculiarly friendly (while preserving the vertical academic relation).

In Lieu of Conclusions

Autism stood between the doctoral student and the promotor. It turned out to be a difficult obstacle, but not an absolute one. The relationship of-

fers a lot of corrective potential. With a fair and engaged attitude of its participants (the student and the master), it is possible to do more than generate a bureaucratic administrative structure (looking for a schema) or a business-oriented corporation (looking for maximum sales). The essence of autism is the individualism of people affected by it, which in a way forces the human being to be human. The benefits are therefore mutual if potential masters understand that by awakening a human being in themselves they win. The subject is to be continued and readers shall stay informed.

N O T E

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