

Education and personality in relation to visual impairment. Visual impairment during the Coronavirus pandemic.

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Abstract

This article focuses on identifying the differences between the personality of people with visual impairments and people without such disabilities, identifying the influences of Covid-19 pandemic on people with visual impairments and understanding the possibilities of alleviating their difficulties.

We also intended to highlight the daily struggles of the visually impaired. During this difficult period -the pandemic - they went through a lot: they could not shop, they could not receive help from other people, because they had to keep their distance and they had to give up their jobs.

Keywords: visual impairment, personality, education, pandemic, research

Defining concepts

Deficiency is “the absence, loss or alteration of a structure or function (anatomical, physiological or psychological). Deficiency can be the result of an illness, an accident, etc., but also of negative conditions in a child's developmental environment, especially emotional deficiencies.” (Bratu apud. Vărășmaș, 2014, pag. 3). Visual impairment is included, as is natural, among sensory deficiencies due to damage to the sense organs, being studied primarily by typhlopedagogy or typhlopsychopedagogy. (Mitran Duțu et al., 2015). “...amblyopia refers to all cases of decreased visual ability, regardless of etiology and severity, or that decrease in vision that is maintained even after the appropriate correction has been made”. (Rozorea, 2011, p. 406)

Depending on the values of visual acuity, some authors (Zamfirescu-Mărgescu, Marin) agree to the following classification:

- Mild amblyopia - with AV2 between 0.5-0.3;
- Medium amblyopia - with AV between 0.2-0.1;
- Strong amblyopia (accentuated) with AV below 0.1;
- Absolute blindness - no perception of light;
- Relative blindness - perceives hand movements, perceives light.

According to Anca Rozorea, typhlopsychopedagogy “studies the issue of physical, mental, psychosocial development, in different stages of life, in the context of visual impairment and the consequences it imprints, in order to accumulate knowledge for the rehabilitative educational action of visually impaired children and people (amblyopic or blind) and to scientifically substantiate the measures and methods meant to contribute to the recovery and social integration of this category of disabilities.” (Rozorea, 2011, p. 396)

Human personality has been investigated over time as a system of traits, which reflects an individual's way of acting, feeling, thinking and adapting to the environment he lives in. The continuous process of understanding the human being, in terms of innate and visual acuity acquired aspects, plays a vital role in anticipating the actions of a person in specific contexts and in different areas of life, such as profession, social interactions, family or attitude towards health. Over time, personality has been studied from several perspectives. Different authors came up with different ideas and theories, trying to prove and determine the complexity of personality and its various components. An example would be Allport, which emphasizes the uniqueness of the individual and the internal cognitive and motivational processes that influence behavior. Another theory would be the one proposed by Eysenck, stating that personality is based on biological factors, and claiming that individuals inherit a type of nervous system that affects their ability to learn and adapt to the environment.

These theories prove that personality is complex, original and individual, so it cannot be researched only from one perspective.

In other words, personality is the individuality or originality of a human individual manifested in terms of social relations. The human personality is composed of temperament, character and skills.

Temperament encompasses all the physiological and emotional traits of a person, which cause mental and behavioral differences from other people. In specialized theories, it is argued that temperament remains constant throughout human life, as opposed to character that can undergo changes, sometimes even substantial. According to the classical conception, temperament is predestined (innate/native, congenital), while character is an element that is formed over time.

Character is the set of fundamental psycho-moral traits of a person, which manifests itself in behavior, ideas and actions, reflecting morality.

Aptitudes consist of skills that allow a person to acquire certain knowledge and abilities (artistic or technical inclination, ability to assimilate knowledge, skill for performing activities, creativity, ability to concentrate, sociability). If the skills are outstanding, then we can talk about talent. Skills are those that favor the achievement of success by an individual, in one or even more fields of activity.

The impact of visual impairment on personality

The development of the human being consists in the gradual formation of the individual's personality, a complex process based on growth (bio-morphological dimension), on maturity (psycho-functional dimension) and on socialization (adaptation to the environmental conditions). Phenomena that occur in all categories of disability are the limited accessibility to information, decreased activism and (self)isolation tendency, these being determinant factors of developmental delays, disharmony in the structure of personality and difficulties in socializing. A general consequence is that people with disabilities in general have low chances to be integrated in society, because their skills are considered below the minimum level of social adjustment requirements. Amid early developmental disorders, the condition of handicap may be installed especially when the social standards and the demand of adaptive skills are high. (Verza, 1995)

Concerning the location of the impairment in different kinds of disabilities, the visually impaired person shows: the primary impairment - at the level of the sensory organ (the eye) or the visual system; which could be blindness or visual impairment of different degrees and the problems

derived from the primary impairment concerning - spatial orientation, written communication, spoken or non-verbal language, emotions and motivation.

If we analyze self-image in children and adolescents with disabilities we find that for them this particular aspect of their personality produces a complex set of trouble with adjustment and integration in the social environment, feelings of inferiority, avoidant behaviour, behavioural disorders, excessive nervousness, anxiety, envy and so on.

Compensation is a biological mechanism for maintenance and recovery of the vital functions of the organism. As "the law" of the developmental process, compensation takes action for rebalancing whenever a disturbing factor such as a deficiency occurs. (Rozorea, 2011)

Decompensation is the reversed phenomenon of compensation and it is frequently present in children with disability, causing them to regress and disadapt. Pseudocompensatory phenomena include maladjusted reactions to adapting requirements. Repeated pseudo-compensatory reactions generate the consolidation of negative character traits. Another adverse phenomenon is overcompensation, which is the dominance of compensatory conducts in overall behavior, producing personality disharmony. (Verza, 1995)

Results of studies on the relationship between deficiency and personality

Study on the Impact of Vision Loss on Personality Traits, University of Macedonia

The aim of this research is to explore the differences in personality traits between blind, visually impaired and sighted individuals.

Eysenck's Personality Questionnaire (EPQ) - four scales that measure introversion / extraversion (E-nervous arousal), neuroticism (N-stability / emotional instability, in the form of anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, shyness), psychoticism (P- adaptability / psychoticism, in the form of aggression, egocentrism, antisocial behavior, lack of empathy) and the tendency to disguise (L-lie, conformity).

The research results were:

Blind children usually have lower scores for extraversion than sighted children. Blind adolescents and young people do not show any statistically significant difference compared to sighted blind people. Men with visual impairments appear to be more extroverted than women with this disability.

Blind adolescents and young people have a higher degree of neuroticism than sighted people (Warren, 1984). Comparing the two sexes, women with blindness are defined by neuroticism more than men with blindness.

Sighting adults have lower lying scale scores than blind and visually impaired adults. One interpretation is that those with disabilities have tried to present a conformist social image of themselves. What leads to such an attitude may be that, due to visual impairment and growing up in a disadvantaged group of society, in a minority, they face serious difficulties in having an independent life in modern society.

University of the Basque Country (Spain). Self-Image, Self-Esteem, Personality Traits, and Psychopathological Symptoms in Visually Impaired Adolescents

ANOVA (Statistical analysis of variance) showed that there are no statistically significant differences on self-image and self-esteem between visually impaired and non-visually impaired adolescents, but visually impaired adolescents had significantly higher scores in certain psychopathological symptoms and in their ability to show good manners. Women with visual

impairments had lower scores for self-esteem than men and higher scores for certain psychopathological symptoms.

Participants with visual impairments had higher scores in the following symptoms: obsessive compulsivity, hostility, paranoid ideation, additional symptoms (melancholy, depression), in the total score on psychopathological symptoms, in the general measurement of Global Psychological and Psychosomatic Sufferings and in Symptoms of Psychological Disorders.

Regarding the evaluated personality traits, significantly higher scores were found in adolescents with visual impairments only related to agreeableness, which shows that, compared to sighted ones, blind adolescents are more selfless, empathize more with others and they are more willing to help them. This feature can be attributed to the marked need of these people to be accepted in the groups of viewers.

However, no significant difference was found between the scores of adolescents with and without visual impairments for neuroticism, even though those with disabilities had higher scores, and other research has shown neurotic tendencies in the blind.

These results suggest that visually impaired adolescents with low self-image and self-esteem are more likely to develop psychopathological symptoms, a tendency toward neuroticism as a personality trait, and low extraversion.

The significant tendency of visually impaired adolescents to develop psychopathological symptoms, compared to adolescents without disabilities, can be explained by the prevalence of anxiety and stress related to visual impairment and implicitly derived maladaptations (difficulty in participating in visual activities, greater dependence on others, greater family control, negative ideas about physical appearance and attractiveness). It continues to be alert, for example regarding teaching-learning situations, when teachers ask for certain topics without taking into account the characteristics of blind students and the effort they have to make to fulfill them.

Education

„Education is a set of actions and influences meant to allow human beings to develop physical and intellectual abilities, but also feelings, moral and aesthetic attitudes, in order to become responsible and optimally socially integrated as a citizen” (Păun, 2005, p. 22). Education is the object of study of pedagogy.

Professor Păun Emil (2005) delimits the types of education and presents them as “educational subfields”: formal, non-formal and informal education.

Formal education designates the school-type educational system, structured in different types of schools and school cycles. This is done on the basis of explicit aims and objectives, structural contents and systematically transmitted by a qualified staff for this purpose, teachers (Păun, 2005).

Non-formal education is represented by all institutionalized educational activities, but which are carried out outside the formal system of school education, educational influences achieved through cultural institutions, through the media, etc (Păun, 2005).

Informal education refers to the unsystematic, more or less spontaneous and accidental educational influences that are exerted on the individual in his daily contacts and interactions (groups of friends, street, family) (Păun, 2005).

Education is a process of personality modeling carried out by the school, family, society that aims to prepare the educated.

The purpose of education is to shape the personality of the individual in accordance with the objective requirements of society, but also of the individual.

The relationship between education and personality

Regarding education of personality, we can state that temperament, as a personality aspect which involves inborn traits, cannot be educated. It is responsible for the flexibility, strength and balance that a person naturally has, thus being unchangeable. However, the other aspects of personality, character and skills are, indeed, educable. Both typical people and people with disabilities are able to develop healthy attitudes, values and aptitudes or destructure old unhealthy ones throughout their lifespan.

Furthermore, it is important to mention the way personality can be educated, most theories stating that it changes as a result of its interaction with the environment. For example, Roberts and Mroczek (2009) determined that personality is often influenced by one's assumption of a role, while Wrzus and Roberts (2014) argued that it is an adjustment following repeated experiences over prolonged periods of time.

What followed was great interest in testing the possibility of intervention on personality traits. For example, one of the studies conducted was a research by Joshua Jackson in 2012 which involved a 16-week program. Its aim was to train the inductive reasoning of 183 adults between the ages of 60 and 94. He asked them to solve Sudokus, crosswords and puzzles on a weekly basis, in order to test a hypothesis stating that developing cognition would cause a change in the openness to experiences. It was found that the study's participants experienced an increase in both the ability to use inductive reasoning and openness to experience, in comparison to the control group. This result ultimately proved the educability of personality traits.

Recovery and VPE

Recovery is the active process by which people with disabilities (as a result of injuries or illnesses) can fully recover or reach their optimal physical, mental or social potential, in cases where recovery cannot be made fully, and is then integrated into an optimal environment. (Hereditas Clinic, n.d.)

First of all, in the recovery of people with amblyopia, action is taken in order to protect their vision. It is also limited to visual activity and it is recommended to avoid harmful working conditions. Children with amblyopia are guided to learn to use visual possibilities and to develop their ability to perceive actively and systematically. Through recovery, certain mechanisms become dominant and slow down the action of other unnecessary or harmful mechanisms. It must also be individualized as appropriate. (Rășfoiesc, n.d.)

Visual-perceptual education (VPE) – “as a specific activity for special education for the visually impaired - contributes to compensating for poor vision, both organically, by

maximizing the visual impairments, and functionally, the impaired visual function being replaced by more intense use and new interconnections of valid analyzers, as well as higher knowledge processes.” (Mitran Duțu et al., 2015)

VPE has special classes in the curriculum conducted by specialists such as psychologists, defectologists, psychoeducational teachers or teachers specialized in this activity. Usually, VPE is carried out as an individual activity and / or activity in micro groups organized according to different criteria (specificity, nature, degree and dynamics of visual impairment, functional

vision indices, vision efficiency, ophthalmologist's recommendations and restrictions, intellectual level and social maturity, age, associated deficiencies, etc.). Each activity must be evaluated in terms of reaching the proposed objectives, the way in which the methodological requirements have been reached and so that, through feedback, future activities can be redesigned, either to correct acquisitions or to ensure a new beneficial effect and progress in sight functionality plan. Visual exercises can be divided into age groups, according to age and perceptual-Piagetian structures. (Mitran Duțu et al., 2015)

It should be noted that "any visual education exercise takes place in stages, namely:

- Acquisition of the notion (individually or collectively)
- Checking the understanding of the notion
- Control of acquired knowledge
- Returning to the complexity of reality.” (Mitran Duțu et al., 2015)

Coronavirus pandemic and people with visual impairments

The COVID-19 outbreak presented unique challenges, both for people without disabilities and for people with disabilities, which include those with visual impairments. For them, tactile sense is essential to navigate everyday life, and with the pandemic, touching now comes with a significant risk.

According to the WHO (World Health Organization, 2021), people who are blind or visually impaired don't have a higher risk of contacting COVID-19 because of their visual impairment, but they are at increased risk due to lifestyle requirements corresponding to the difficulties encountered:

- ❖ Difficulties in implementing good hygiene measures, such as the inability to locate or see hand sanitizers that are spread in stores (at the entrance).
- ❖ The guidance is done with the support of the elbows of others (elbows are now used for sneezing and coughing).
- ❖ The need to touch things frequently for guidance and to identify things.
- ❖ Comorbidity like diabetes and other conditions.
- ❖ The need to use public transport (crowded, difficult to socially distance)

Also, RNIB (Royal National Institute of Blind People, 2020) notes that the number of visually impaired people navigating alone around the shops has halved during the epidemic, falling from 28% to 14%. In addition, given that the effects of the pandemic are also reflected in the psychological side of these people, a specialized RNIB counseling service has been implemented that people can turn to for emotional support, which provides opportunities for people with visual impairments to connect with others online or by phone.

According to The Conversation (2020), many visually impaired people are concerned that they need to touch more items, to bring them close to their eyes and have more contact with a potential virus-laden environment. Also, at home, people who cannot see well and live alone face challenges in reading deadlines, checking cooking instructions on a food package, or making sure they are taking the right dose of medication, relying on either specialized devices or

volunteers from charities, which unfortunately no longer offer home visits, so the possibilities for those who don't have such devices are very limited.

Conclusions

The new context of life, imposed by the Coronavirus for the whole world, is a touchstone, a trial for everything that we have been building or should have built until the present moment in and with our education system. Our society is being assessed by the nature concerning our capacity to adjust, to think flexibly and act creatively.

As we already have presented in this paper, all the information that we need is available to us. We know about the existence of different types and degrees of visual impairment, we have knowledge about the specificities of the complex development of visually impaired people, about their special needs, we are provided by the specialists with inventories and assessment instruments, strategies, methods and means of education for their personalities. All we must do at this stage of changing order in all aspects of life is to use the available resources in order to produce the necessary adjustments. What keeps us back from being physically close to one another has to be what motivates us to be there for people through collaboration and communication. Good and efficient information for the general population about some concepts such as diversity, acceptance, inclusion, equity is fundamental for a better understanding of the matter and involvement in this world that "looks" different for people with visual impairments.

In the special psychopedagogy field we need, maybe more than ever, parents who are also specialists. The role of family and close ones for people with visual impairment is, from now on, decisive for the success or the failure of their integration process. Online special education and long-distance therapy rely on the support of those who can mediate between education and people with disabilities, those who can be extensions of those senses that are limited by deficiency. Education now depends on every one of us, therefore it is necessary for all to be very well informed and responsible for those around us for whom we can facilitate a path to knowledge.

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