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PARENTS' AWARENESS OF THE FUNCTIONING OF CHILDREN WITH AUTISM IN THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT. ON THE EXAMPLE OF PARENTS SZCZECIN SCHOOLS

ABSTRACT

The authors of the article sought to investigate parents' awareness and comprehension of Autism as well as the issue of prejudice in schools. The study was carried out in elementary schools in Szczecin with the aim of identifying issues concerning children's functioning, diagnosis, medical and psychological support, institutional and family responsibilities, attitudes towards children in and out of school, and the protection of the rights of individuals with Autism. The study results are valuable and helpful for parents, teachers, and children seeking to comprehend the challenges faced by students with Autism. These discoveries have the potential to enhance understanding and raise awareness of the difficulties experienced by persons with these diseases. Furthermore, the study results might be crucial in adopting strategies to enhance the well-being of families and children impacted by these situations in school and other settings.

KEYWORDS: *discrimination, childhood disorders, Autism, school environment*

INTRODUCTION

There is a significant amount of material focusing on the difficulties experienced by children with autism spectrum disorders, especially regarding their physical and mental health. Moreover, there is an increasing emphasis on fostering social inclusion and enabling individuals with disabilities to actively engage in social activities (Jan-Llopis & Anderson, 2005; Taylor et al., 2004). It is crucial to promote awareness, acceptance, equitable treatment, and educational opportunities in schools for all persons, regardless of their background. Everyone should be treated with decency and respect, and steps should be taken to guarantee equitable access to resources and opportunities for all. We need to carefully analyse these challenges and strive to build a more inclusive and fair society (Kołakowski et al., 2021; Nermend et al., 2022). The research issue is essential for the welfare and achievement of children in many settings, including school, home, and society. It is crucial to study how to effectively assist youngsters in various environments to enhance their growth and development. Autism remains a prevalent concern in Polish classrooms. Further study is needed to address the issue of prejudice,

particularly concerning the mental health of students. This topic is crucial and requires attention. There is a research vacuum due to a lack of studies and information on parents' knowledge of children with Autism. Thus, delving into a study on this issue can increase awareness and address the existing gap, as proposed by the authors. The article explores the public's understanding of Autism and the problem of school discrimination, examining social and legal viewpoints. Regrettably, people suffering from these disorders frequently encounter cruel treatment and a disregard for their rights. Because of the distinctive characteristics of these illnesses, individuals with Autism are frequently perceived as challenging in the classroom. Schools and households should provide a secure environment for successful instruction, knowledge sharing, and information exchange (François-Sévigny I in., 2022). Students must comply with the school's policies and expectations. This activity allows individuals to cultivate crucial abilities, including attention, concentration, and self-control. Failing to achieve these needs might result in challenges in a student's everyday life and lead to bad perceptions from others. It is crucial to offer assistance and tools to kids with difficulty meeting these goals.

This article focuses on autism spectrum disorder. The illness is multifaceted, including several symptoms and is classified as a comprehensive developmental disorder (DeMyer & DeMyer, 1984; Michałowicz & Józwiak, 2000; Popielarska et al., 2000). It is crucial to acknowledge that disruptions or irregularities in the progression of social interactions, behaviour, communication, and cognitive abilities can significantly affect a person's life (King et al., 2014; Yates & Le Couteur, 2016). Children with autism spectrum disorder may have challenges in social interactions because of their distinctive worldviews, leading to behaviours that others may misinterpret. This might result in undesirable outcomes, including rejection, scorn, and even violence from their peers. We must provide a supportive and inclusive atmosphere for children with Autism in schools and society (Nowakowska & Pisula, 2018; Uniwersytet w Białymstoku & Otapowicz, 2021). Having precise information on children with Autism is crucial for ensuring they receive the necessary legal protection and tailored social assistance to meet their unique requirements. Discrimination against children with Autism extends beyond only a social aspect. In this situation, there is a significant legal issue concerning

the common mismatch between legal standards and the requirements of this specific set of children and their family members. Acknowledging the significant role of teachers and administrators in advancing anti-discrimination initiatives, particularly with preschool and school-age children, is critical. Educators may promote a sense of belonging and respect in the school community by actively creating a safe and inclusive environment for all kids. Teachers and principals can significantly impact their students' lives through curriculum development, classroom management strategies, and demonstrating positive behaviours and attitudes. Legislatures in democratic states governed by the rule of law must provide legislative procedures to combat discrimination. It is crucial to educate close family members and everyone surrounding children with special needs about the significance of knowing their requirements. Comprehending the circumstances of children with Autism is essential for offering them the requisite legal protection and social services tailored to their individual needs. The discrimination against these children is both a social issue and a legal one stemming from the legal standards' failure to accommodate their actual needs and those of their families. Thus, it is essential to implement efficient strategies for safeguarding and promoting the well-being of children.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was carried out among parents to assess their understanding of ADHD and Autism and their knowledge of discrimination in the school setting, encompassing social and legal dimensions. To do this, we administered a survey utilising a questionnaire. The authors exclusively provided the findings related to Autism in the publication. In the first phase, we compare Autism and ADHD, which we expanded in a forthcoming publication. The study was directed at parents of pupils from three primary schools in Szczecin. The schools had comparable student populations, ranging from 700 to 750 pupils. The schools were selected based on their diverse academic achievements and academic achievement ranking in Szczecin in 2023. Approximately 10,306 kids from primary schools participated in the Ranking Szkół Podstawowych

2023. Aside from the research results, the study incorporates a personal interview with the school principals. During the interview, the administrators mentioned that the parents of kids in the schools had diverse social backgrounds, education levels, and socioeconomic statuses. These variables lead to varying expectations for their children's educational journey. The child's awareness, needs, and learning process are influenced by the social and economic situations of their environment and the parents' expectations. The survey questionnaire consisted of 39 questions. The survey targeted parents of children aged 7-15 who are enrolled in primary schools. 2100 parents were given access to the survey via an electronic link. Respondents were briefed on the survey's objective and the intended use of the results before taking part. We calculated the required research sample size to achieve precise results, taking into account the unique nature of the topic under study, which pertained to dysfunctions in youngsters such as Autism and ADHD.

In Poland, around 1 out of every 100 children are diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. ADHD is estimated to affect 3-8% of children (Miernik-Jaeschke, n.d.). Extensive studies and discussions in this field have been conducted in Poland for several years. (How common is Autism?, n.d.; NIK on support for individuals with Autism and Asperger's syndrome in preparing for independent functioning, n.d.; ADHD statistics 2021, n.d.) as well as globally (Autism Society, n.d.; Data & Statistics on Autism Spectrum Disorder, n.d.; Data and Statistics About ADHD, n.d.; Prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder Among Children Aged 8 Years — Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network, 11 Sites, United States, 2016, n.d.; Prinz, n.d.). A social awareness survey was conducted with a sample size of 116 respondents. The minimal sample size for the study was determined to be 108 individuals for ADHD and 16 individuals for Autism, with a confidence level of 95% and a 5% tolerable estimate error. After data cleaning and removing inadequacies, a sample of 116 valid respondents was selected from a survey with a return rate of 6.47%. Structural indicators were utilised to analyse the survey findings.

The study survey was then modified and split into two parts. The initial segment of 9 items inquired if respondents met the participation criteria. The second half of 30 items, with 15 items dedicated to each conceptual component of ADHD and Autism (Ankieta wiedzy o ADHD i autyzmie, b.d.).

The thematic sub-dimensions encompass accepting children with dysfunctions and their parents, preventing violence, eradicating disparities between children with dysfunctions and healthy ones, teaching children tolerance, ensuring developmental and life comfort for children with dysfunctions, precise legal regulations, educational initiatives, enforcing penalties against discriminators, offering psychological support for individuals interacting with the child, maintaining a firm stance by teachers, honouring dignity and privacy, and guaranteeing rights such as the right to education, the right to be heard, and the right to treatment.

The study assessed 15 thematic subdimensions using a five-point Likert scale to determine their value, with 5 indicating the most importance and 1 indicating the lowest. Fifteen sub-dimensions were assessed for ADHD and Autism separately. The questionnaire was tested for reliability and demonstrated extremely reliable and acceptable findings (Bitta et al., 2021). Reliability tests were conducted on two separate instruments, one for ADHD and another for Autism, with comparable findings. The questionnaire's total dependability, encompassing both items, was determined to be 95.8% (Frazier et al., 2023). The questionnaire's clarity and the participants' comprehension of their children's problems likely influenced the high dependability rating.

SURVEY RESULTS

The survey data was analysed with SPSS V 26 (Statistical Package for Social Sciences Version 26). The qualifying 9 items and conceptual 30 items were first presented with the percentage of responses for their respective categories. Further, the conceptual data analysed for reliability measured the survey questionnaire's acceptability. The statistical test ANOVA clarified the level of awareness for 30 items representing the conceptual dimensions of Autism (Fridman I in., 2017; Miyasaka I in., 2018; Sizoo I in., 2009).

The respondents surveyed indicated that, for the most part, 68.1% know a child with Autism, indicating that it is most often Asperger's syndrome. 63.3%, including 16.5% of those among them, do not know what type of Autism the child has. As the respondents indicated, this knowledge significantly translates into

forbearance towards the child's behaviour (45.7%) and their adherence to specific recommendations (50%). Respondents also pointed out that those around a child with Autism perceive the child as less capable (32.8%) or did not indicate a specific answer (33.6%). In addition, more than half of the respondents said they had encountered negative behaviour towards a child with Autism (50.9%).

Regrettably, parents of children with dysfunction are frequently held responsible for circumstances beyond their influence. The respondents were asked if they believe there is a negative assessment of parents of a kid with Autism. Respondents said that 48.3% view parents in cases involving children with Autism negatively. They feel that the public perceives them as having raised a misbehaving kid (30.4% autism) and ignored them (32.1% autism). A minority of individuals additionally argue that some parents of these children are claimants (16.1% have Autism). Respondents were also asked to pinpoint sources of prejudice against individuals with Autism. Respondents mentioned fear of the unknown (24.1% autism), inability to handle challenging situations (16.4% autism), and lack of tolerance (8.6% autism). Respondents unanimously agreed that to combat discrimination against children, educational initiatives to prevent bias towards disabilities should be enhanced (Autism 73.4%), psychological support should be offered to individuals interacting with the child (Autism 67.6%), and teachers should adopt a strong stance against those who discriminate against the child (Autism 65.1%). The majority of respondents believe that individuals with Autism have the primary rights to medical care (82.9%), dignity (80.2%), and education (78.7%).

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed for the conceptual sub-dimensions of autism items. The parameters 'Should children with Autism be taught' and 'Do individuals from the environment of a kid with autism regard them as such?' were chosen as the variables to assess the variation in group attitudes collected on a nominal scale. After calculating the F-value and significance level, it was determined that the 7 dimensions were statistically insignificant with a p-value greater than 0.05, indicating no significant difference in opinion about the education of children with Autism. The 8 dimensions showed a statistically significant result below or around 0.05, indicating a notable variation in attitude towards educating children with Autism. The component *Do you think that people from the environment of a child with*

autism perceive them as such? was used to determine the F-value and significance level for 15 dimensions. Thirteen dimensions had p-values above 0.05, indicating no statistical difference in opinion. However, the two dimensions had p-values below or close to 0.05, indicating a significant difference in opinion regarding teaching children with Autism.

CONCLUSIONS

It is disconcerting to see that despite the abundance of publications, the general population in Poland still lacks an adequate understanding of Autism. The variation and uniqueness in how individuals with Autism function provide a notable issue. Every kid with Autism is distinct, and their symptoms might differ, leading to varied behaviours. Increased awareness and education are needed to tackle this issue.

Prompt identification and appropriate intervention for medical problems such as Autism can significantly enhance the likelihood of effective recovery. Parents and carers should recognise the signs and symptoms of different diseases and promptly seek medical help. Consistent follow-up appointments and evaluations are crucial for tracking a child's mental growth and ensuring they get the necessary treatment and assistance. Autism is a significant social issue that requires care in the educational setting. Educational institutions must guarantee equitable access to education for those with impairments. Schools in Poland are adopting an inclusive education strategy to ensure full participation in the educational process. Creating a friendly and supportive environment for all children is crucial, and it is commendable that Polish schools are implementing measures to achieve this.

Although schools have made significant attempts to accommodate kids with Autism, properly integrating them into school and social life remains a difficulty. We must persist in exploring novel ideas and tactics to guarantee every kid feels supported and involved. Most polled respondents agree that children with Autism should attend mandatory education in schools with integrated courses. It is essential to remember that providing inclusive education in Polish schools is obligatory when needed. The legal basis for

this action is the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which mandates that governments guarantee an inclusive education system, allowing pupils to participate fully at all educational levels. Article 24 of the Convention specifically highlights this obligation. The opinion of respondents appears to influence the choice of educational placement significantly. Most respondents believe that children with Autism Spectrum Disorder disrupt other children during sessions. Regrettably, this viewpoint is not singular. Customised teaching and evaluation techniques for children with Autism are essential for how other students and their parents see these students. Their response was likely influenced by their own past experiences or those of their friends. Regrettably, the actions of kids with Autism are sometimes misinterpreted and seen as impolite. Several reasons may contribute to this, including the failure to execute special education guidelines, poor behaviour assessment systems, insufficient prevention of problematic behaviour, or a lack of individualised teaching approaches. It is disheartening to learn that young adolescents are frequently ostracised by their peers in school because of these misunderstandings. It's crucial to acknowledge that when a child has a condition, it's not just the youngster who may encounter criticism from the public. Parents may face persistent challenges associated with their child's abnormal growth. This may cause substantial disturbances in family dynamics and societal connections. Impaired family functioning can restrict the child's social improvement and adjustment prospects (Honey et al., 2005). It is crucial to provide assistance and support to the youngster and the entire family. This method can enhance the child's development and bolster social relationships in the community. Creating a friendly and inclusive atmosphere for families is essential, as it may significantly enhance their well-being and achievement (Pisula, 2002). Research was undertaken to examine society's attitude toward parents with children who have dysfunctions. The results were discouraging since several respondents conveyed unfavourable opinions about these parents. Some people thought these parents had brought up a mischievous youngster and failed to pay them proper attention. Furthermore, a tiny fraction even suggested that some of these parents were claimants. We need to dismantle these detrimental preconceptions and assist all parents as they navigate the challenges of parenting children.

In Poland, a legislative foundation ensures equitable access to education, healthcare, and diverse social services for those with disabilities. The poll results are positive, indicating that a significant number of respondents support the idea that people with Autism should have access to treatment, dignity, and education. This indicates that society is increasingly recognising the significance of equal rights for those with diverse impairments. The results can aid in a more profound understanding and recognition of the child's problems and functioning. It is crucial to comprehend the challenges of a student's functioning under such situations to guarantee they receive the necessary assistance and interventions. The study's findings might increase awareness among parents, teachers, and children about the difficulties experienced by those with Autism. Enhancing the well-being of families and children impacted by these diseases is crucial within and beyond the school setting.

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