

Adults with special needs in lifelong learning

In spite of the fact that blindness and partial sightedness are phenomena quite recognised and known by the general society, it is still very difficult for a blind or partially sighted person to adapt to it. In this article, we will be dealing with blind and partially sighted adults and with their attempts to be included in the active society.

In Slovenia, blind and partially sighted people are joined and represented by a National Blind Association of Slovenia, which is divided into nine smaller regional associations. In the year 2010, there were 4062 members, among which 1792 were partially sighted and 2270 blind people. The data reveals that there are 74,89 % of people who are over 50 years old and 61,40 % older than 65. Another sad data reveals that there are 48,41 % of people between the age of 18 and 65 who are already retired.

After seeing such a statistics, we can pose ourselves a very simple question: Are these people able to lead their own lives? According to statistics, there are only 300 employed people in the entire country: 181 partially sighted and 119 blind people. The situation is obviously very serious and needs to be taken as such as well.

As it has been mentioned previously, the National Association is divided into 9 regional associations which are the ones who have actual and direct contact with their members. The biggest are associations from Ljubljana and Maribor, followed by associations of Celje, Kranj, Koper, Nova Gorica, Ptuj, Novo Mesto and Murska Sobota. Blind and partially sighted people, especially older members, have the possibility to participate in the activities, offered by their association. Some of these activities are:

- Embroidering, knitting, crochet;
- Excursions to different parts of the country, usually not lasting for more than a day;
- Seminars (lasting about three to four days and usually taking place in homes owned by the National Association for the Blind);
- Several lectures, workshops;
- House-keeping and daily living activities;
- Sporting activities (particular games for the blind, chess, ninepins, swimming, etc).

These are activities which motivate people to gather together and to spend a quality free time. However, these are not the only types of activities, we can also find some more educational ones or the ones which are designed for people, who became blind later in their lives, how to reintegrate in the society. Such activities are as follows:

- Courses of basic computer knowledge;
- Mobility courses;
- Braille courses;
- Self-help groups;
- Trainings of other senses;
- Trainings of relatives of a blind or partially sighted person (how to behave around the visually impaired person);
- Learning of several employment techniques where a blind or partially sighted person works on his or her self-image and obtains a feeling of usefulness;
- Personal assistance.

It is important to note that not all of these activities are being successfully and regularly performed by every association. Usually, bigger associations are more active and offer more activities than smaller ones. Most often it happens that, due to a lower number of participants, associations concentrate only on a few, most popular activities.

While observing the older blind and partially sighted population, we can quickly realise their isolation, incapability of independence and lack of engagement with the sighted society. The reason is their lack of motivation and information about the possibilities they actually have. Since most of older population becomes blind or partially sighted later in their lives, they do not immediately have the needed knowledge concerning specific subjects such as mobility skills and daily living skills. This sudden change in their lives faces them with completely new point of view which is not easy to accept. On the other hand, we also have to expose the lack of information of doctors and specialists concerning the rehabilitation programmes and suitable associations. Before a blind or partially sighted person reaches an organization which is ready to help, he or she loses a lot of motivation and obtains even more fear and uncertainty. This, CONSEQUENTLY, results in a complete isolation.

The only contact with the society many blind or partially sighted persons really have, are their family members. However, this usually does not mean that this is their way to meet new sighted people. They are mainly searching for people with the same disabilities and problems, people, who they can identify with. Unfortunately, regional associations are being far too protective sometimes. Most of their activities are intended only for the blind and partially sighted population instead of organising activities where these people would be confronted with the usual society. If blind and partially sighted people appeared more often on the streets in casual situations, sighted people would accept them more readily and would feel less uncomfortable in their presence.

Of course there are a few exceptions of older adults who are successfully included in the sighted society and in lifelong programmes as well. These are usually people who have been surrounded by a sighted population most of their lives and have proven themselves as equal and capable of completing several tasks sufficiently. Usually these are people who have been employed or at least very active in their hometown and have forced the society to »forget« about their deficiency and take into consideration their actual qualities instead.

If we want to motivate older blind and partially sighted population to start educating themselves and to open to the society, we have to make them feel useful and competent. Many people who are visually impaired from birth have already accepted themselves as they are, but most of older people who started having sight problems later on in their lives, do not pay enough attention to this aspect. Organizations should treat them as functional citizens, instead of suggesting them that they need a lot of help and new skills in order to be able to function properly. This would definitely have a positive impact on their self-assurance and would give them the needed energy to learn new skills and to take their lives in their hands again. Consequently, society would start accepting them as people with certain needs, but as the ones who are competent and capable of fulfilling the tasks just as anyone else.

To conclude, most of blind and partially sighted people are isolated and often not motivated enough to engage themselves in any lifelong learning programme. Most of them prefer to gather with their visually impaired colleagues at their nearest regional association and do not even consider participating at any programme or workshop which is not offered by their association. Consequently, society perceives them as unusual and not capable of living their

own lives. Many visually impaired people are enormously intelligent and have developed certain skills that sighted people do not have. If they started to use these skills on the street, in their daily life, if they started to appear more often among sighted people, sighted people would realise that blindness or partial sightedness are not the end of their potentials, but a new way of starting them.

Aleksandra Surla: Zveza slepih in slabovidnih Slovenije