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ATTITUDES TOWARDS PERSONS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES IN ADOLESCENTS

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION

An increased interest in the field related to disability results in a change of social approach towards disability. However, the attitudes towards persons with disabilities constantly depend mainly on the type and the degree of disability, including physical, psychosocial disorders or intellectual disabilities. The situation for the latter group seems to be the least favourable, and thus contacts with persons with intellectual disabilities are still limited.

AIM OF RESEARCH

The aim of the study is to determine what attitudes towards persons with intellectual disabilities are present among adolescents and what changes in these attitudes occur through their participation in educational activities carried out purposely.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research method is a diagnostic survey and a pedagogical experiment - a one group technique. To determine the attitudes of adolescents towards persons with intellectual disabilities the Scale of Attitudes Towards Disabled Persons (PWON) by Sękowski was used. In the pedagogical experiment, the scenarios of lessons based on "Join us" Education Program for Special Olympics Poland were used. A cohort of 47 students aged 15 - 16 years, including 26 girls and 21 boys participated in the study.

RESULTS

The gender of respondents is not the factor which significantly differentiated attitudes towards persons with disabilities both before and after the pedagogical experiment. The pedagogical experiment changed the attitudes represented by investigated adolescents to more positive ones.

CONCLUSIONS

"Join Us" Education Program for Special Olympics is an effective tool for stimulating positive attitudes toward persons with intellectual disabilities among adolescents. It seems that the educational process should be supplemented with lessons devoted to the problem of intellectual disability, which will increase the awareness of adolescents and lead to integration of communities with intellectually disabled persons.

KEYWORDS: intellectual disability, attitudes, Special Olympics, education

INTRODUCTION

An attitude is a relatively stable structure of cognitive emotional processes and behaviours relating to the object or disposition for these processes and behaviours to appear [20]. This is a tendency for a positive or negative way we, as humans, relate to the object, which may be: an event, an idea, a subject, but also a person [39]. The attitude is constituted largely by the emotional element and specific knowledge that provides the basis

for evaluation of a given object [6]. Its dimension is dependent primarily on the characteristics of the object to which it refers [16]. The question of attitudes toward people with disabilities [22] is a particularly complex and controversial issue in the literature. In time, with the development of society, there is perceived evaluation of attitudes toward this group of persons, where discrimination against them, followed by their isolation and separation, is shifted toward acceptance and integration [27, 44]. In the literature, attitudes toward people with disabilities are viewed most frequently with regard to their extreme, i.e. indicating their positive or negative nature. But when making such evaluation, one should take into account the following three criteria: the cognitive, emotional and social dimension [33]. Therefore, it is important to take into account such components of positive attitudes as: objective evaluation of the impact of disabilities on psychology and the functioning of individuals (taking into account the actual limitations and opportunities), positive cognitive attitudes (perception of not disabilities only, but also the needs, achievements or advantages) and positive social behaviours (acceptance, respect and cooperation and friendly contact with a person with disabilities). Negative attitudes are characterised mainly by: feelings of pity, or overprotection, overestimation or underestimation of the impact of disability on the functioning of an individual, negative cognitive attitudes (stressing diversity, paying attention to the defects and ugliness of disabilities) and negative social attitude (no acceptance and distancing ourselves in interpersonal relations, a sense of fear and embarrassment in relation to people with disabilities) [32, 43]. The results of the research show, however, that there is a large discrepancy between declared positive attitudes and actual behaviours toward people with disabilities [34], since these evaluations dependent upon social expectations and frequent true opinions not in line with social standards and principles are deliberately concealed [8]. Rojahn et al. [28] confirmed this relationship examining the attractiveness of disabled peers of the opposite gender. The evaluation of the explicit attitude did not show significant differences, but implicit attitudes indicated a strong preference of persons without disabilities. The difference between the explicit and implicit attitudes was explained by prejudices and expectations.

In their analysis of attitudes toward persons with disabilities, Chodkowska and Kazanowski [7] note that in general, these attitudes are unambiguous and should be considered on the basis of the two criteria: their sign and multidimensionality and having regard to the social interactions between people with disabilities and without disabilities.

Seen from this angle, attitudes may be placed on a continuum, i.e. from the attitude of acceptance, partial acceptance, ambivalence, disregard, to dislike or hostility. In addition, this multi-dimensional nature among attitudes toward people with disabilities is linked to a number of diverse determinants, among which the factors concerning persons with disabilities themselves as well as personal, social and cultural determinants are analysed [14]. Among the factors associated with persons with disabilities themselves - the type of disability, the level of self-acceptance and self-assessment and perception of one's own disability [17] are of special importance. While in the socio-cultural dimension, what seems to be significant are the social stereotypes that perpetuate the image of a person with disabilities as weak and different from the rest of society [10] followed by: religious practices, professional contact with persons with disabilities, ethnocentrism or demographic variables, such as age, gender, education, occupation and nationality [44]. In the group of personal factors which modify the attitude toward people with disabilities in a negative direction, one should mention: a high level of social acceptance, fear, neuroticism, aggressiveness, dogmatism, a rigid system of beliefs, intolerance, a low level of intelligence, empathy or a reduced sense of purpose in life [18]. Sękowski and Niziołek [36] note that in addition to the general trends shown in the attitudes toward persons with disabilities that have already been discussed, it should be emphasized that their development depends to a large extent on the kind of disability. Research showed that during contacts with persons with disabilities who have visible physical anomalies and malformations, healthy persons suffer significant discomfort, they are disturbed, they behave unnaturally, they smile less frequently and reveal specific forms of avoiding physical contact - by increasing their interpersonal distance [25]. But these negative attitudes are not confirmed in relation to people with physical disabilities, but in relation to people with mental disorders and people with intellectual disabilities. Persons with physical disabilities find jobs more frequently, have more friends without disabilities, they are more involved in the political and social life. Whereas people with intellectual disabilities are most often rejected and even stigmatised by healthy persons [1, 36]. An innovative study using multimedia techniques and such Internet platform as Twitter, showed after gathering "tweets" containing the phrases: "intellectual disability" and "mental impairment" that they are used as insults in relation to groups or individual persons. The results of the study indicate the offensive understanding of the concept of "intellectual disability" and the view on this group of population [15]. This is

also confirmed by the studies carried out by CBOS (Public Opinion Research Centre) in 2007 on 844 adult inhabitants of Poland. It shows that the most - if other types of disabilities are taken into account - i.e. 29% of those surveyed would not accept to provide care for people with disabilities and would prefer to avoid similar situations [5]. The research carried out by Sękowski [33], among both the inhabitants of villages and towns, showed that attitudes of respondents toward people with intellectual disabilities are most negative (66.7%) and least positive (3.3%) in relation to other groups of persons with disabilities. Negative attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities are associated with barriers in their daily functioning [1] and difficulties in establishing interpersonal contacts [21]. Researchers indicate also that the degree of intellectual disability is of significance for the attitudes of society. Attitudes toward people with a mild level of intellectual disabilities are nevertheless more positive than attitudes toward people with profound or severe intellectual disabilities [2, 3].

The above mentioned results show the disadvantaged position of the intellectually disabled people in many aspects who, as a result of negative societal attitudes, experience social isolation. No acceptance, the conviction that persons with disabilities have negative traits, judgemental or biased evaluation of limitations relating to disabilities are perceived particularly acutely; at the same time, they may be a source of insecurity, fears, conviction of one's own low self-esteem. Consequently, it generally decreases the quality of life that is the effect and result of the quality of interpersonal relations [35].

In this situation, the right solution is to try to change the presented negative societal attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities. The modification of these attitudes may be based on interactions having its specific or non-specific nature. These specific interactions manifest themselves in positive experiences in the course of direct contacts with persons with disabilities and the transfer of knowledge on disabilities and its impact on an individual's day-to day functioning. They consist in creating positive emotional attitudes toward people with disabilities. The second way is based on a non-specific impact, which involves the influence of personality traits on the process of developing attitudes, including raising self-esteem and creating conditions conducive to favouring social and moral values. Attitudes toward people with disabilities may be developed in each period of life, but the modifying impact shows the greatest effects when working with children and young people, and the results achieved in these groups are relatively stable. In practice, such forms of

impact as transferring knowledge on disabilities and creating opportunities for personal contact with such a group, organizing extra-curricular groups that foster mutual learning in the form of fun and creating integrated classes [36] are applied. Attitudes of children and adolescents toward people with disabilities are linked to factors such as: gender, life satisfaction, knowledge about disabilities and age. It appears that girls have positive attitudes toward people with disabilities more often than boys [3, 41]. Also, the children with higher life satisfaction reveal positive attitudes toward people with disabilities. The frequency of contacts and the type and quality of the peer relationship [41] are of great importance in developing attitudes, too. Changing attitudes toward people with disabilities may also take place through targeted educational activities - as in the case of research carried out by Seccombe [31] on the group of medical university students. In the study carried out by the author, such educational forms as: educational role-plays, simulations, discussion panels and debriefing sessions contributed to the change of the attitude to a more positive one. Attitudes among the investigated students are associated with the interaction of factors such as education, transmission of information about disability, the type and frequency of contact with persons with disabilities and the experience gained. Building more positive attitudes certainly implies a severe impact aimed at the cognitive and emotional - motivational sphere. The relationship between negative attitudes and the transfer of stereotypes and transmission of intergenerational culture makes the process of their modification both difficult and long-lasting. It is essential that the proper development of these attitudes should take place as early as possible within the formative years, because then it is most effective [37].

Together with the trend of changes in the approach to people with intellectual disabilities and social integration policy of people with different disorders or disabilities, it seems appropriate to determine the level of favourability to persons with intellectual disability in a selected group of adolescents. It is also useful to raise awareness of the problem of disability among young people. Increasing their knowledge on this subject and changing their attitudes to a group of persons with disabilities through targeted educational activities.

The results obtained may be important information concerning the possible direction of educational activities and their effectiveness in developing positive attitudes toward

people with intellectual disabilities. To be able to verify empirically this research problem, the following questions were formulated:

1. What is the attitude of young people toward people with intellectual disabilities before the commencement of targeted educational activities?
2. What is the attitude of young people to people with intellectual disabilities after the completion of targeted educational activities?
3. What changes occurred in the attitude of the investigated group of young people to people with intellectual disabilities?
4. What are the differences between girls and boys in terms of attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was conducted among 47 persons aged 15 and 16 years (Female=26, Male=21). The adolescents attended the secondary school in Krotoszyn. In the study, two research methods were used depending on the phase of its implementation. The research consisted of three phases.

In the first phase of the study, the diagnostic survey was used for the purpose of collecting data. The Scale of Attitudes Toward People with Disabilities (PWON) by Sękowski was used as a research tool. It was modified and supplemented with the term "intellectual disabilities" in order to refer all 30 statements to the group of persons determined by the authors of the study. The modified scale showed a high reliability rate, namely $\alpha_{\text{Cronbach}}=0,87$. The investigated adolescents responded to the statements included in said scale using the 6-point Likert's scale. This tool is based on the assumption that the more similarities in the behaviour of people with disabilities and without disabilities may be identified by respondents, the more their attitude is positive, also, the higher the results in the range from 0 to 180, the more favourableness can be seen in the relation toward people with disabilities [33]. This phase was carried out in three separate groups, in classrooms. The time of the study covered about 30 minutes. It was preceded by the explanation of the aim and the content of the survey.

During the second phase of the study, the authors used the research method of pedagogic experiment, one group technique. It took four months and was carried out in the

same groups in which prior evaluation of attitudes had taken place. The pedagogical experiment consisted of targeted educational activities in which the Manual for Teachers of Secondary School from "Join us" Special Olympics Poland Education Program was used. This program is based on the idea of Special Olympics "So Get Into It" and contains six lesson plans. It aims to teach understanding and favourableness of diversity, to change the awareness and to help achieve equitable treatment of all people, including those with intellectual disabilities [23]. The activities using the above program were carried out during educational lessons. During classes, various forms of work were used, including: presentation, group work, individual work, dialogues.

The third and final phase of the study is the re-evaluation of attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities that took place using the same research tool that was used in the first phase (Scale of Attitudes Toward People with Disabilities (PWON) by Sękowski) and the same research procedures applied before the targeted educational activities.

Statistica software package was used for the purpose of data processing and statistical analysis. The attitude toward people with intellectual disabilities was measured on the basis of the modified PWON scale and was a dependent variable (in two phases of the study), whereas gender was an independent variable. The basic statistics (minimum, maximum, average, median, standard deviation, coefficient of variation) were calculated and normal distribution for the investigated variables was confirmed, which determined the use of the parametric statistical measures. For the purpose of the analysis, repeated measures ANOVA: gender (women vs. men) x phase of the study (1 phase vs. 3 phase) was used.

RESULTS

Data analysis showed that more favourable attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities before the undertaken educational activities are shown by investigated girls ($M=118.8$; $SD=31.30$) in comparison to the investigated boys ($M=113.52$; $SD=27.67$). There were no statistically significant differences between the investigated boys and girls in this phase ($p>0.05$), however high variations in the level of average attitudes within each group (tab.1) were noted.

Table 1. Statistical data concerning the results of study on attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities.

Attitudes toward people with I.D.*	Mean	Standard deviation	Median	coefficient of variability	Min.	Max.	P
General before E**	116.45	29.54	119.0	25.37	19.0	164.0	>0.05
General after E**	127.21	21.22	125.0	16.68	82.0	168.0	
Girls before E**	118.80	31.30	122.5	26.34	19.0	161.0	>0.05
Girls after E**	132.0	20.11	129.5	15.23	92.0	168.0	
Boys before E**	113.52	27.67	115.0	24.37	24.0	164.0	>0.05
Boys after E**	121.28	21.53	125.0	17.75	82.0	159.0	

*ID - Persons with intellectual disability

** Before the experiment/ after the experiment.

The results of the analysis of the data collected during the third phase of the study - after educational activities - changed to more positive ones, both in terms of attitudes shown by respondents and without taking into account gender division (M=127.21; SD=21.22) and in the group of girls (M=123.0; SD=20.11) and investigated boys (M=121.28; SD=21.53). Variation in response among the respondents was lesser, which shows more similar attitudes in the investigated group. Also, in this phase, there were no statistically significant statistical differences between the investigated girls and boys ($p > 0.05$).

As a result of the ANOVA analysis, a statistically insignificant effect was achieved: $F(1.45)=0.19$; $p=0.70$; $\eta^2=0.01$, which indicates that in the attitude to persons with intellectual disabilities no statistically significant differences between different phases of the study were observed (before and after the introduced educational activities) with a view to the gender variable. In order to verify the obtained statistically insignificant effect, the post-hoc analysis was made using the NIR test, which also did not demonstrate any statistically significant differences in the compared phases of the study in terms of the respondents' gender. Although no statistically significant differences were shown, the trend to shift attitudes toward people with disabilities toward more positive ones is noticeable (Fig. 1)

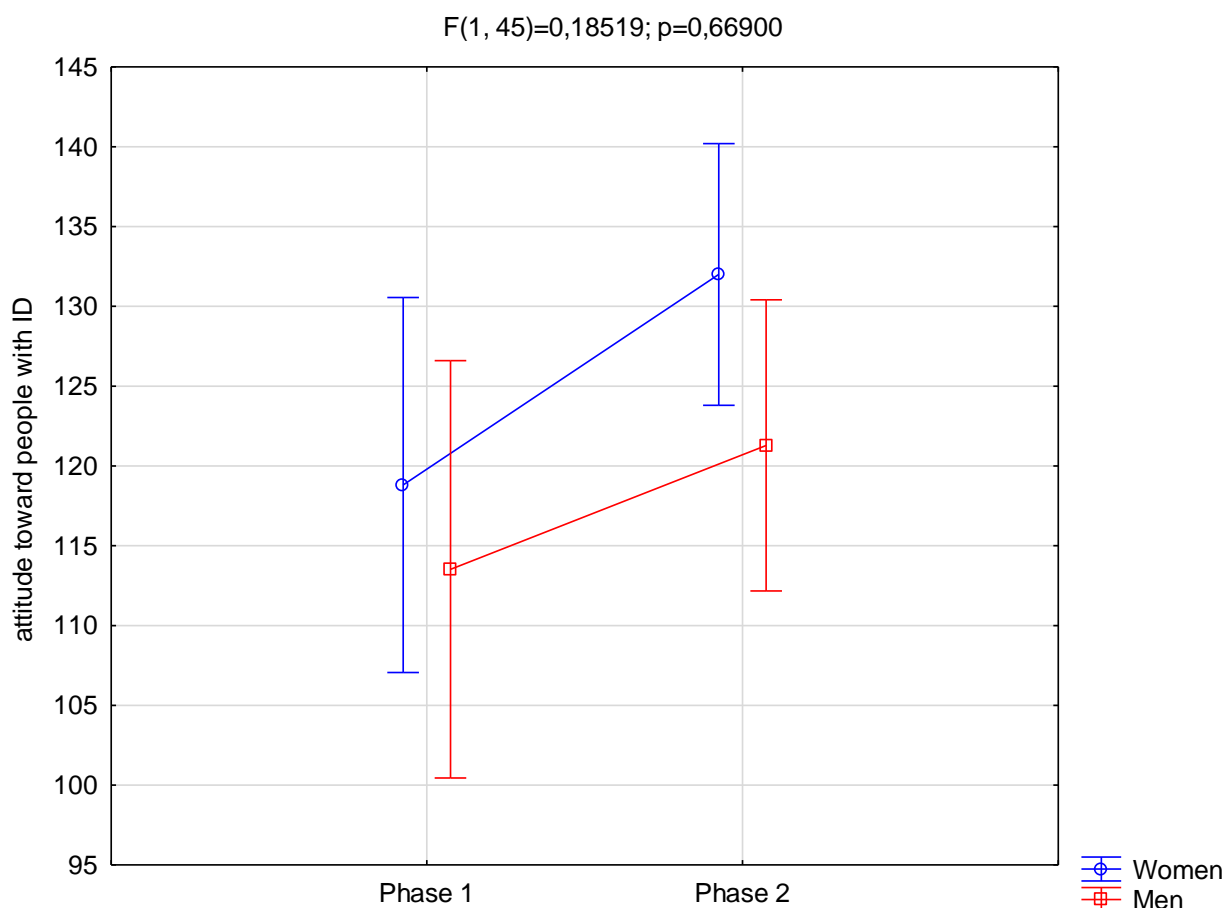


Fig. 1. The level of attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities as a function of gender and phase of study.

DISCUSSION

The study should be referred to the research results achieved by Wiliński et al. [38], who also used the modified version of the Scale of Attitudes Toward People with Disabilities (PWON) by Sękowski, by specifying questions relating specifically to people with intellectual disabilities (in the original version - general reference to people with disabilities). The adolescents investigated by the authors of this work showed attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities that are similar to those represented by students of physiotherapy and more positive, in relation to the students of physical education, as described in the paper by Wiliński et al. [38]. Thus, it would seem that already before taking educational actions, the investigated adolescents show relatively favourable attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities, despite lesser emotional and social maturity than the group of adult students. The fact that age is also a factor that may imply an attitude toward people

with disabilities was discussed by e.g.: Vignes et al. [41] who showed that children with higher life satisfaction are more open to disabilities of their peers as compared to the group of adults. Spending time together with persons with disabilities and the readiness to help them is declared most frequently by younger people (i.e. pupils and students) [10]. Many reports based on research indicate that women accept people with disabilities more and they are more willing to help them [10, 19, 29], which corresponds to the results obtained by the authors of the present study. The investigated girls have a more favourable attitude toward people with intellectual disabilities than the investigated boys.

The contrary results concerning the research on attitudes toward people with disabilities among young people were presented by Gil et al. [11] who refer to the strengthening of improper attitudes among secondary school students in their research. In the studies carried out by the authors, it was indicated that more than 90% of investigated adolescents expressed the opinion that people with disabilities should stay in nursing homes, like the elderly on a permanent bases. Also, the research by Rutkowska [30] showed that a small percentage of investigated adolescents declared positive attitudes toward people with disabilities and nearly 45% investigated students of vocational schools showed negative attitudes in relation to them. In the presented results of research by Chajda [5] similar conclusions were made; more frequently the youngest respondents - pupils and students mention improper attitudes toward people with disabilities in comparison to the total population of Poland.

The complexity of the problems associated with attitudes of young people toward persons with disabilities is present in many other studies [22]. It appears also that the respondents in the present research have a marginal level of knowledge about the types, causes and characteristics of disabilities and sporadic contact with persons with disabilities, which is determined by only declaratory positive attitudes toward them, and also exaggerated convictions about the limitations of this group. It is also noted that regardless of the type of school that is represented by adolescents, they show the greatest distance to people with intellectual disabilities. According to scientists, the negative image of people with intellectual disabilities in the literature and the media is the cause of disapproval. Adolescents primarily follow the attitudes of teachers toward students with disabilities and adopt the hierarchy of stigmatizing factors based on numerous stereotypes that are passed down from generation to generation, e.g. through language or labelling [9, 17, 24, 40]. The

group of persons with motor disabilities is in a more favourable situation based on the opinion of adolescents, as shown by Nowak [22]. According to the authors' research, 80% of all respondents, define their attitude toward persons with motor disability as positive, although more often it is declared by students aged 14-16 than high school students aged 17-18. None of the respondents admitted to having expressed the negative attitude to people with motor disabilities. Nowak, however, notes that despite the optimistic results, one should be careful with their interpretation, as a positive attitude toward people with disabilities is often of a declaratory nature and may vary from the one that is actually shown. Therefore, it is worth considering whom the respondents may have in mind when it is necessary to respond to intellectual disabilities, which may account for the lesser favourableness to this kind of disability than any other types. Byra [4], when considering the term "intellectual disabilities", indirectly, through investigating students of pedagogy, includes e.g.: persons with Down syndrome, people with a profound level of intellectual disability and those with cerebral palsy into intellectual disabilities. Persons with Down syndrome and autism were considered the main representatives of intellectual disabilities. This result indicates the diversity in using the term "intellectual disabilities", which may be caused by the lack of knowledge about the characteristics of disability and referring only to the attributes associated with appearance [38]. Sękowski [33] expresses a similar view - that attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities are determined by social stereotypes, traditional prejudices and a lack of knowledge of the needs and opportunities and actual difficulties.

Some scientists indicate that adolescents, with greater knowledge on the subject of disability, display more positive attitudes, although there are also representatives of the assumptions that the relationship between attitudes and the prior knowledge cannot be clearly confirmed [3]. Brook and Galili [3] demonstrated that with increasing age, children become more tolerant toward peers with disabilities. In the Internet research carried out by Bossaert et al. [3], it was found that positive attitudes toward people with disabilities were linked to the viewing of the film showing the daily life of persons with disabilities, which took place prior to the assessment of attitudes. It therefore appears justified that the improvement of favourableness of attitudes toward people with disabilities is possible. Zajdel [43] mentions even about the necessity to take such actions. In his research, Zajdel shows that the development of positive attitudes toward people with disabilities should be a

necessary condition in all the activities of all educational institutions and opinion formers. If no action is taken, persons with disabilities will always be separated by psychosocial barriers from people without disabilities. People with disabilities want to be perceived by society as “complete” persons and are capable of not only taking, but also giving. The change of attitudes to more positive ones in relation to the group in question, determines their life situation, their self-esteem and aspirations and develops the conditions for vocational and social rehabilitation. According to Wiliński et al. [38], the best opportunity to improve the favourableness of attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities is the transfer of the relevant knowledge to a selected group of recipients, and bringing about a series of meetings with the rejected group, preferably within the framework of joint activities. Hall and Minnes [13] believe that for this purpose, it is worth using media communication, particularly, in the form of a documentary, because then it is the most effective.

The objective picture of people with intellectual disabilities can also be enhanced by undertaking targeted educational activities. This effect was obtained by Piasecki and Sidor [26], who in their research noted an increase in positive attitudes in young people from secondary schools measured on the basis of the PWON scale by Sękowski. Also, the authors of the study, as a result of the pedagogical experiment which covered educational activities based on "Join Us" Special Olympics Education Program, demonstrated the shift of attitudes toward more positive ones. One should also pay attention to the Education Program of Special Olympics as such and its efficiency. Special Olympics is considered an exceptionally functional organization, promoting and rehabilitating through physical activity and including persons with intellectual disabilities into social life on a global scale. The image of people with intellectual disabilities, that is genuine and easy to accept [12], is presented with respect and dignity by Special Olympics. "Join Us" Education Program is a program that is focused on the inclusion of people without disabilities and those with intellectual disabilities. It is being successfully introduced in more than 160 countries around the world. It generates important learning effects, mainly due to the promotion of ethical values, such as care for other people, responsibility, honesty and respect for oneself and others as a fundamental basis of good character and a sense of belonging to civil society [23]. This also exerted an impact on young people in this study, the result of which are more positive attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities among the investigated girls and boys.

The obtained results have also practical implications - through raising awareness of the problem of disability among young people and increasing their knowledge on this topic. The research results may be used as a guideline to take action aimed to change the possible social situation of persons with disabilities. It seems justified to develop positive attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities on a permanent basis. If appropriate measures to support and to include this group in the scope of social interest are not taken, these persons will continue to be marginalised and excluded [38].

CONCLUSIONS

On the basis of the results obtained the following conclusions may be made:

1. The pedagogical experiment performed with the use of "Join us" Education Program changed the attitudes of investigated adolescents to more positive ones.
2. The gender of the respondents is not a factor which differentiates significantly attitudes towards persons with disabilities both before and after the pedagogical experiment.
3. "Join Us" Education Program for Special Olympics is an effective tool for stimulating positive attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities among adolescents.
4. It seems that the educational process should be supplemented with lessons devoted to the problem of intellectual disability, which will increase the awareness of adolescents and lead to integration of communities with intellectually disabled persons.

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